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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)

Monday 27 January 2025

HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-NINTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 9 JULY 2024]

THIRD YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HIS MAJESTY KING CHARLES III

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 761

TENTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2024-2025

House of Commons

Monday 27 January 2025

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we start today's business, I want to note that today is Holocaust Memorial Day. I know that the whole House will agree with me about the importance of remembering, especially on the 80th anniversary, the 6 million Jewish people murdered during the Holocaust, alongside the millions of other people killed as a result of Nazi persecution, as well as those killed in more recent genocides—Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur. I know that colleagues will want to join me in thanking the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust for the important work it does.

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Free School Meals

1. **Ian Byrne** (Liverpool West Derby) (Ind): What assessment she has made of the potential merits of introducing free school meals for all primary school pupils. [902376]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan): Our Government are driving an agenda to break down barriers to opportunity and reduce child poverty. Around £1.5 billion is spent annually on free lunches for over 3 million pupils. This includes all children from reception through to year 2, and we have committed to introducing free breakfast clubs in state-funded primary schools. As with all programmes, we will keep our approach under continued review.

Ian Byrne: Knowsley, an area in my constituency, has the highest proportion of obese and overweight children in England, according to NHS data. Knowsley council's director of public health recently described to me how this was an issue of poverty and deprivation. We know from research into universal free school meals in London that such a policy can reduce obesity rates by up to 10%. Earlier this month, I got unanimous support from the council when I suggested that Knowsley could be a perfect test bed for the roll-out of universal free school meals. Will the Minister meet me and the leader of Knowsley council to discuss that possibility?

Stephen Morgan: Over 13,000 pupils in Knowsley are supported with a healthy and nutritious free meal at lunch time through the Department's free school meals and universal infant free school meals programmes. Unlike the Conservative party, we are on the side of parents in making a child-centred Government a reality. My hon. Friend is a real champion on these matters, and I am happy to meet him to discuss them further.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): Because the previous Government widened eligibility, one in three children could get a free school meal in 2024, compared with one in six in 2010. That was despite the fact that 600,000 fewer children were growing up in workless households and that the proportion of people on low pay had halved. Will the Minister commit that this Government will maintain those levels of eligibility?

Stephen Morgan: The Department recognises the valuable role that free school meals play and encourages all parents eligible for the entitlement offer. We will continue to review our approaches and take a consistent approach going forward.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Both in government and in opposition, the Liberal Democrats have a proud record of championing free school meals for all those who need them. However, even today, too many children from some of the poorest eligible families are missing out. Lib Dem-led Durham county council has automatically enrolled children for free school meals this academic year, resulting in over 2,500 additional children getting a meal at lunch time, and an extra £3 million in pupil premium funding for the county. Will Ministers finally commit to automatically enrolling all eligible children in England? The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill is the perfect opportunity to do so.

Stephen Morgan: As I mentioned, we will keep our approach in all Government programmes, including eligibility for free school meals, under continued review. We are aware of local measures on auto-enrolment being trialled and are supportive of the overall aims of such schemes.

Sixth-form Colleges: Pay Award

2. **Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): If her Department will provide sixth-form colleges with the funding required to support a 5.5% pay award for teaching staff. [902378]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): The Government do not set or recommend pay in further education. However, in the midst of tough decisions taken at the Budget to fix the foundations, after having been left with a £22 billion black hole by the Conservatives, we have reprioritised an additional £300 million for further education.

Sarah Owen: I declare an interest, because my husband works at Luton sixth-form college, although this question does not affect him. I am proud to have Luton sixth-form college and Barnfield college in my constituency—places where young people develop not only their education but their ambitions. Excellent sixth forms stay that way only by attracting and retaining the best staff. However, with the funding shortfall left by the last Tory Government, I am concerned that it is our younger generations who will feel the loss. Will the Minister outline how sixth-form colleges can use their funds to deliver the deserved 5.5% pay rise for teaching staff?

Janet Daby: I recognise the vital role that sixth-form colleges play, including Luton sixth-form college, and I agree that high-quality staff are what helps to make them great, as well as our amazing students. That is why we announced an additional £300 million for further education in the Budget, and it is why we are releasing £50 million of that funding in this academic year, so that colleges can respond to priorities, including workforce recruitment and retention, and use those funds as they see fit.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): Balcarras school in my constituency has calculated that if its funding for its sixth form had increased by just 2% over the past 15 years, it would now have more than £650,000 extra to keep its school running. The head warns me that the

sector is now at breaking point. Do Ministers recognise what is going on in the sector after the years of underfunding we have had?

Janet Daby: I reiterate that the one-off £50 million grant will enable colleges to respond to current priorities and challenges as they see fit, including workforce recruitment and retention. It is up to those colleges and sixth forms to choose how to use that funding to best meet learners' needs. I invite the hon. Member to write in if he would like some further information.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): The hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) has asked a very important question. The Government funded the pay award for schools and academised sixth-form colleges but, unlike last year, not for stand-alone sixth-form colleges. That decision has already led to seven days of industrial action. After threats of judicial review, the Department for Education offered some additional funding, but only £7 million of the £19 million that is needed. That funding gap has led to a pay gap, and as a result the National Education Union has more strikes planned and the NASUWT is also balloting. What is the Government's plan to end the dispute and end the damage that is being done to those students?

Janet Daby: The hon. Member will know that industrial relations are a matter for sixth-form colleges themselves, in co-ordination with the sector-led national bargaining arrangement through the national joint council. We encourage open and constructive dialogue by all parties in the best interests of staff and students during this critical transition period.

Reading in Schools

3. **Paul Davies** (Colne Valley) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to encourage reading in schools. [902379]

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): Getting more children reading for pleasure is a key part of our plan for change, and of our work to drive high and rising standards across education by giving all our children the best start in life. Earlier this month, I was pleased to join the Prime Minister as he unveiled a landmark partnership between schools here in the UK and in Ukraine, based on the power of reading and backed by legendary children's authors including Michael Morpurgo.

Paul Davies: According to the Libraries for Primaries campaign, one in seven state primary schools in the UK lacks a dedicated library or reading space, and that figure rises to one in four in the most disadvantaged communities. As we know, reading for pleasure is essential to a child's academic success and mental wellbeing. Thousands of primary schools still need libraries. Does the Minister agree that libraries are vital for child development, and what further steps can the Government take to ensure that every primary school has a library?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the power of reading. We all know that reading broadens horizons and nurtures creativity, and I want more children to experience that joy, although sadly,

we also know that more and more children in our country are not enjoying reading for pleasure. Under the Tories, one in four children were leaving primary school without meeting the expected standard in reading; it is little wonder that they are unable to enjoy reading in the way they should. Through our plan for change, we will drive high and rising standards to make that a reality.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the Secretary of State accept that the use of phonics as the basis of teaching reading has been thoroughly vindicated?

Bridget Phillipson: I do accept the absolutely essential role of phonics—it was a Labour Government who first started the roll-out of phonics in 2006. We need all our children to reach a brilliant standard in reading, but as I have just said, one in four currently do not meet the required standard. There is so much more that we need to do to ensure that all our children get a firm foundation in those subjects and, yes, enjoy reading as well.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): We know that smartphones in the classroom have a negative impact on reading and on the educational attainment of children in general. When in government, we issued guidance to try to ban smartphones from the classroom, but the latest evidence is clear that they are still far too prevalent in schools. To fix the problem, the guidance needs to be put on a statutory footing. Does the Education Secretary agree that children's educational outcomes are negatively affected by smartphones, and if she does, will she back our amendment to ban them from the classroom for good?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree that phones have no place in the classroom. It is entirely right that schools take firm action to stop their use, and I know that is what the vast majority of schools already do. As the right hon. Lady said, last July the Conservatives said that they did not need to legislate in this area. Nothing has changed in this time. I back the approach that they took in July in this area. This is yet another headline-grabbing gimmick, with no plans to drive up standards in our schools.

Artificial Intelligence: Research and Development

4. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on support for artificial intelligence research and development in the higher education sector. [902380]

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): The Labour Government are at the forefront of change and, as I said to the Bett conference last week, we are determined to ensure that

“AI will be a positive, radical, modernising force for good in the lives of working people.”

The Department for Education is a member of the AI working group collaborating across Government to share thinking and expertise as we develop future policy.

Christine Jardine: Many of my constituents and local academics have expressed concern about the cancellation last year, by this Government, of what would have been the UK's only exascale computer, at Edinburgh University.

That was not mentioned at all in the AI opportunities action plan. It would have been a major beneficial development in this sector. What discussions is the Secretary of State having with Cabinet colleagues to ensure that this takes place, and can she reassure the public that the benefits of AI will be spread to universities across the UK?

Bridget Phillipson: I appreciate the hon. Lady's interest in this area. She will know that the proposed exascale supercomputer is one programme that the Government are considering. We are currently assessing the best way to take this forward. The previous programme was announced under the last Government, for which full funding was not allocated. We are committed to developing a strategy setting out a 10-year plan for our country's needs. That plan will be published in the coming months alongside the spending review, but I will ensure that officials in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology pick up her concern and that she receives a full response.

Clinical Academics

5. **Peter Prinsley** (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help retain clinical academics in universities. [902381]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): As autonomous institutions, universities are responsible for their staffing decisions, including recruitment and retention. Where the Tories left universities on the brink, we have acted decisively to secure the future of the higher education sector. We remain committed to restoring universities as engines of growth, opportunity and aspiration.

Peter Prinsley: The number of clinical academics is in worrying decline. These are the people who teach our doctors in universities and are conducting groundbreaking research. Consultant clinical academics' contracts with universities give them pay parity with the NHS. However, the universities do not have the funding to match the costs of the new NHS pay structure for consultants. I have heard that, unable to retain them, 20 out of 26 medical schools in the country are offering voluntary redundancy to their staff, and sometimes not voluntary. Does the Minister agree that we must do all we can to support medical education and research in this country?

Janet Daby: I am aware that my hon. Friend has extensive knowledge in this area, and I seek to reassure him that the Government recognise the vital role that clinical academics play in research and education in the NHS. Although universities are independent and therefore responsible for decisions on pay, we are committed to working closely with education partners to ensure that clinical academia remains an attractive career choice for all, including students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The new Pears medical school at the University of Cumbria and the Lancaster University medical school, among others, are struggling to recruit and retain medical academic staff, in no small part due to the last Government's somewhat masochistic decision to undermine one of Britain's best exports: namely, the income we receive from overseas students. Will the Minister undo this

nonsense and allow Britain's brilliant universities, especially the medical schools, to help boost the quest for economic growth?

Janet Daby: Students are incredibly important to our universities, and we have some world-leading universities. I will ask my hon. Friend in the other place to respond to the hon. Gentleman's question.

Family Hubs: Kent

6. **Mike Tapp** (Dover and Deal) (Lab): What steps her Department has taken to help keep family hubs open in Kent. [902382]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): Labour's plan for change will get a record share of children ready for school, hitting key developmental targets by the age of five. Family hubs will play a crucial part in that. We are investing £69 million in family hubs, targeting support where the money will make the biggest difference to children's life chances.

Mike Tapp: In Deal, Blossom children's centre has been closed, and the new merged service does not offer the level of service required for one to four-year-olds and is not fit for purpose. What can be done to reopen that much-loved and sorely missed community asset?

Janet Daby: Local authorities must engage with families to co-design services and ensure that those services meet their needs. We are investing £126 million in family hubs, Start for Life, and through our plan for change. This Government aim to get a record proportion of children hitting key developmental targets by the age of five. If my hon. Friend would like to write to me on any particular issue, I would be happy to take it up. Departmental officials are aware of the case he raises and are working with Kent county council to continue to deliver services.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: I had not realised that Strangford was in Kent.

Jim Shannon: The issue is in Kent and in Strangford, Mr Speaker. The Minister is right to respond on the importance of disability and family hubs in Kent, and in Northern Ireland we have a commitment to the very same process. Has she had an opportunity to discuss the ways forward here with those in Northern Ireland, so that we can share experiences and the best way?

Mr Speaker: Does the Minister wish to answer that question, because it is definitely not linked?

Janet Daby: I assure the hon. Member that the Secretary of State has had such conversations and will continue to do so.

SEND Provision

7. **Edward Morello** (West Dorset) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to support schools requiring specialist facilities for SEND students. [902383]

8. **Olly Glover** (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to improve support for children with special educational needs and disabilities. [902384]

10. **Lewis Cocking** (Broxbourne) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to improve special educational needs provision. [902386]

12. **Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What progress she has made on improving support for children with SEND. [902388]

17. **David Taylor** (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve SEND services. [902394]

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell): This topic is of interest to many colleagues across the House. The previous Conservative Education Secretary labelled the special educational needs and disabilities system that she left behind as “lose, lose, lose”, and the shadow Minister said that the previous Government should “hang their heads” in shame over their record. Just last week, a Schools Minister of 10 years said that they had “let down” thousands of children. We agree wholeheartedly. That is the system we inherited, but there is light at the end of the tunnel as this Labour Government work hard to reform and improve the system.

Edward Morello: Some 52% of students at Dorset Studio school in my constituency have special educational needs, which is well above the national average, and 11% are in receipt of education, health and care plans. A funding agreement between the Treasury and the Department for Education in February 2023 to upgrade the school's facilities, including a new school hall, a canteen and specialist teaching facilities, aimed to bring the school up to purpose, yet there has been no progress since May 2024. Will the Minister outline what steps the Department will take to get the ball rolling? If she does not know, will she please meet me so that we can get things started as soon as possible?

Catherine McKinnell: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's question and his concern about making advancements. Improving capital provision for children with special educational needs and disabilities is a priority for this Government, which is why we have allocated £740 million of additional investment to create those additional places in mainstream and special schools. I am more than happy to look at the case he raises—indeed, it might also be for the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), to look at.

Olly Glover: In Oxfordshire, the high needs of our accumulated deficit is expected to rise to £77.1 million by the end of 2025, and across England it is expected to rise to nearly £6 billion in the same period. Does the Minister agree that, in the long term, a shift towards inclusive education, early intervention and enhanced support in mainstream schools is essential to create a sustainable and effective system that meets the needs of all children and young people, and will she commit to delivering it?

Catherine McKinnell: The hon. Gentleman asks an important question, and we absolutely need to see a more inclusive mainstream system with an education, health and care plan process that gets children with special educational needs and disabilities the support they need. By doing so, we will improve the mainstream inclusivity of our schools. As I have outlined, we have allocated capital funding for that, but we are looking at reforms on a range of levels to ensure that children can be educated in their local community as far as is possible.

Lewis Cocking: I draw attention to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Since I was elected, I have heard countless times from parents across Broxbourne that the special educational needs system is too difficult to navigate and all too often just does not work. What action is the Minister taking to improve the confidence of parents in the SEN system?

Catherine McKinnell: I recognise the story that the hon. Gentleman tells. Indeed, it is told by many families up and down the country. He should recognise that this legacy was left by the last Conservative Government for many families and many children, letting them down. We are working incredibly hard to reform our system with a curriculum and assessment review, with capital investment and by working with local authorities to improve the education, health and care plan process and the timeliness of assessments. We will continue to do that to clean up the mess.

Debbie Abrahams: I recognise what my hon. Friend says: she has inherited an appalling situation from the last Government. A recent Public Accounts Committee report bore that out. Can she give a little more information on how she will reduce the number of families not getting timely assessments? How will she address the doubling of demand for assessments?

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend is right to refer to the worrying findings of the Public Accounts Committee on the situation we are in. As she rightly identifies, it is our ambition that all children receive the right support to succeed, where possible within mainstream schools. That will need education, health and care plans to be processed more effectively, but also for mainstream schools in and of themselves to be supported to become inclusive, so that children and their families are not left waiting. That will help to reduce the cost of transport, because far too many children are being transported to other local authorities over great distance and time, as they cannot be educated locally. All these measures will not only drive down the challenges for families, but get much better outcomes for the money being spent.

David Taylor: At a recent surgery, a constituent told me that she had fought Tory-led Hertfordshire county council to carry out an EHCP assessment for her son for well over a year. Since it concluded, she has been forced to go to tribunal six times in the past two years. She informed me that she met resistance from the school and the council throughout. After years of neglect by not only the previous Conservative Government, but Conservative local councils, I welcome the steps the Government are taking to reform the SEND system. What assurances can the Minister give to my constituent and others in Hemel that EHCP assessments will be a priority?

Catherine McKinnell: I am sorry to hear what my hon. Friend says about his constituent. We need to see education, health and care plan assessments progressed more promptly, and we need to ensure that plans are issued as quickly as possible, so that children can begin to benefit from the support. The Department is working closely with local authorities that have issues with timeliness. There is, without doubt, a lot more to do, but we are determined to improve the situation for children and their families.

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

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): There are children with special educational needs and disabilities in every school across the country. Often, they face unacceptable barriers to participation, including school buildings that are not inclusive or fully accessible. What is the Minister doing, as part of the Government's welcome commitment to inclusive mainstream schools, to ensure that all expenditure by the Department for Education on new school buildings and building refurbishments helps to make schools more inclusive?

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We want every teacher to be a SEND teacher and every school to be an inclusive school. We are making progress by investing £1 billion into SEND, and £740 million into creating more inclusive specialist places in mainstream schools and undertaking the adaptations that may be required in mainstream schools to make them more accessible.

Child Safeguarding

9. Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): What steps she is taking to strengthen safeguarding for children.
[902385]

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill is the single biggest piece of child protection legislation in a generation. It will stop more children falling through the cracks through landmarks reforms—no more empty words but real action to keep children safe. It is a shame that the Conservative Opposition have played silly games on this subject.

Luke Akehurst: Last week, the Leader of the Opposition dismissed safeguarding measures in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill as a distraction. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Timothy, you have been a bit loud recently, and I am sure you do not want an early cup of tea today.

Luke Akehurst: After the tragic cases of Star Hobson, Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Sara Sharif, will the Secretary of State remind Opposition Members why those measures are vital if we are to protect children?

Bridget Phillipson: Opposition Members might not like it, but that is what the Leader of the Opposition said. The Conservatives had 14 years to stop vulnerable children falling through the cracks. Now is the time for action—no more empty words or lessons learned. Labour has brought forward the single biggest piece of child

protection legislation in a generation, but the Conservatives refuse to back it. To label the measures a distraction is a new low. I encourage the shadow Secretary of State to distance herself from those shocking remarks.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): The Secretary of State should consider what she just said. The Bill has specific clauses about home schooling. I know that the Labour Government do not like any form of education that is not in state-run, local authority schools, but those who home school have significant concerns that the Bill will put unfair burdens on them and will change the relationship between those who are lawfully and legally educating their children at home and the state. Will she meet home schooling representatives to discuss their concerns and to ensure that while the Bill contains the relevant safeguarding, those who home school are made to feel that they are contributing to their children's welfare?

Bridget Phillipson: Parents who choose to home educate their children are within their rights to do so. Those who provide a safe, loving environment and a good standard of education have nothing to be concerned about in the legislation. We are concerned about the growing number of children of whom we simply have no visibility. The Bill will ensure that where there are serious concerns about child protection and safeguarding, such as where a section 47 investigation is under way, the local authority must consent to home education. I am staggered that the hon. Gentleman finds those straightforward measures to keep children safe such an outrage. They are about protecting children.

SEND Provision

11. **Chris Coghlan** (Dorking and Horley) (LD): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to ensure that SEND provision is adequately funded. [902387]

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell): Despite having to make tough decisions at the Budget to fix the foundations, key education priorities were protected. That is how we are able to provide a £1 billion high needs budget to help local authorities in schools support young people with SEND. As I said, we inherited a lose-lose-lose system, but we are determined to reform it and restore parents' trust. The Secretary of State and I regularly meet Ministers from other Departments on special educational needs policies, to ensure that we take a whole of Government approach.

Chris Coghlan: Every headteacher in Dorking has told me that early intervention is vital for our special needs children. The London Business School told me that hiring people with special educational needs can be a source of competitive advantage for companies. Does the Minister agree that those principles could be the basis of a more financially sustainable and compassionate special educational needs system, and could avoid tragedies such as that of my constituent Jennifer Chalkley, who tragically lost her life aged 17 due to inadequate SEND provision?

Catherine McKinnell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his thoughtful question. We absolutely recognise the role of early years education in identifying needs and

providing timely support. We have launched the new SEND assessment resources and child development training, and are identifying and supporting communication needs through the early language support for every child programme, along with NHS England. We will continue to work across Government to ensure that children with SEND get the right support at the right time. I am very sorry to hear the tragic circumstances of the case the hon. Gentleman outlined.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. One of the biggest pressures on SEND funding in Stoke-on-Trent are the independent alternative providers that charge tens of thousands of pounds for single places, often with huge profit margins for themselves. We are subject to a safety valve arrangement. Could I therefore ask the Minister to meet a delegation of providers and teachers in Stoke-on-Trent, who are hungry for a new way of delivering SEND provision to ensure that our young children get the education they deserve?

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the challenges and pressures on the budget. I have identified the need to improve the situation with school transport by educating children locally and to provide more inclusive mainstream places. Where special school places are required, we need to ensure they are in the right place and available for the children who need them. I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to hear the ideas of his friends.

Free Speech

13. **Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Reform): What steps she is taking to support free speech in educational settings. [902389]

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): It was a Labour Government who first enshrined freedom of expression in law, and Labour is to this day committed to freedom of speech and academic freedom. That is why we are pressing ahead with a robust, rigorous and workable Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023, and taking common-sense decisions in the national interest.

Lee Anderson: Unfortunately, a minority of teachers subscribe to the sort of dog-whistle, divisive politics sometimes heard from those on the Government Benches—and from those down here on the Liberal Democrat Benches, by the way. This has put some children in Ashfield off expressing their own opinions during sensible debate in schooltime. Does the Secretary of State agree that while in the classroom, teachers should remain politically neutral?

Bridget Phillipson: I have had the privilege of visiting hundreds of schools across our country, and I can tell Members that children in the schools I visit are usually never backward in coming forward with their opinions; I would hope that is the case in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, too. Of course, schools have a duty to promote fundamental British values and are subject to long-standing legal duties that prohibit them from promoting partisan political views.

Apprenticeships

14. **Laura Kyrke-Smith** (Aylesbury) (Lab): What steps she is taking to increase the number of apprenticeships. [902391]

20. **Ian Roome** (North Devon) (LD): What plans she has for the future of apprenticeships. [902397]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): The Government have a mission to break down barriers to opportunity, and we want to rebalance opportunities in favour of young people who have the most to gain from apprenticeships. Where starts have fallen by almost 40%, we are introducing foundation apprenticeships to give more young people a foot in the door at the start of their working life.

Laura Kyrke-Smith: We are fortunate to have some great apprenticeship providers in Aylesbury, such as the Buckinghamshire College Group and Buckinghamshire New University. When I joined pupils from the Grange school at their careers fair, I saw at first hand their excitement about the apprenticeship options on offer. We know that apprenticeships are a win-win for young people and for sectors facing recruitment challenges, such as health and social care and construction. What steps is the Minister taking to expand and strengthen apprenticeships, and to ensure that all young people who choose to go down that route are able to do so?

Janet Daby: My hon. Friend is a real champion for students at Buckinghamshire colleges, and indeed for young people across Aylesbury. I know the area she represents very well. After the Conservatives left us with a collapsing apprenticeship system and other skills shortages, Labour is listening to employers and redrawing the system through Skills England, a new growth and skills levy and new foundation apprenticeships. That is how we will unlock opportunity and drive growth.

Ian Roome: Back in the autumn, the new Government announced plans to reduce the financial support available for level 7 apprenticeships. Does the Secretary of State understand that curtailing higher-level apprenticeships will make it harder to access graduate-level skills and qualifications in rural areas such as North Devon, where there are no universities nearby?

Janet Daby: The Government have an extremely challenging fiscal inheritance and tough choices need to be taken on how funding should be prioritised to generate opportunities for all. Employers will still be able to offer and invest in level 7 apprenticeships where they feel they provide a good return on investment. We have taken advice from Skills England, which engages with employers on funding for level 7 apprenticeships, over the autumn. The Department expects to make a final decision on affected apprenticeships shortly.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): The Government have said in answer to written questions that they have a forecast for the number of apprenticeships but that they will not publish it for Members to see, which is a shame. At the last oral questions, the Secretary

of State said it was still the Government's policy to allow employers to spend 50% of their apprenticeship levy money on other things. Is not the reason the Government will not publish their forecast for the number of apprenticeships that their policy will lead to a sharp reduction in the number of people starting apprenticeships?

Janet Daby: We are very confident about what the Government are doing with apprenticeships. Our levy-funded growth and skills offer, with apprenticeships at the heart, will deliver greater flexibility for learners and employers in England, aligned with our industrial strategy, creating routes into good skilled jobs in growing industries. As a first step, that will include shorter duration and foundation apprenticeships in targeted sectors.

Specialist Teachers: Disabled Children

15. **Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): What steps she is taking to ensure that disabled children have access to specialist teachers. [902392]

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell): High quality teaching is the most important in-school factor for improving outcomes for all children, including those with disabilities. That is why we are committed to delivering our first step of recruiting 6,500 new teachers to drive high and rising standards in our schools in both mainstream and specialist settings. We are doing that by bolstering pay and conditions, and restoring teaching as a respected, expert profession.

Marsha De Cordova: Research in June 2023 found that only 56% of teachers in mainstream schools felt confident about supporting children with a special educational need or disability. Today, that means many children, including in my constituency, are still missing out on learning and leaving school without the skills they need. Does the Minister agree that we need more specialist teachers, including those for multisensory purposes and for children with visual impairments, to ensure every child has the opportunity to fulfil their potential?

Catherine McKinnell: All teachers are teachers of special educational needs and disabilities. High quality teaching is central to ensuring that pupils with SEND are given the best possible opportunities to achieve in their education. To support all teachers, we are implementing high quality teacher training reforms, which begin with initial teacher training and continue through early career training to middle and senior leadership. These changes and reforms will ensure that teachers have the skills to support all pupils to succeed, including those with SEND.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): On Friday, I had the opportunity to visit Manor Mead special school, where 60 members of staff look after the 92 pupils, many of whom have the most severe learning disabilities and autism. I was absolutely blown away by the care of the staff, and I was particularly grateful to be shown around by the adorable Luchia, one of the pupils. Will the Minister join me in thanking all our special school teachers for the amazing commitment they show, and on Manor Mead's behalf, may I invite her to visit and see that work at first hand?

Catherine McKinnell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question and for celebrating teachers, particularly in our special schools but also throughout our school system, who work tirelessly day in, day out to support pupils, particularly those with special educational needs and disabilities, to succeed. I will certainly take away his very kind invitation.

National Insurance Contributions

16. **Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the National Insurance Contributions (Secondary Class 1 Contributions) Bill on the early years sector. [902393]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan): As a Government, we have had to take tough decisions to get the public finances back on track. In 2025-26, the entitlements budget will be over £8 billion, with a further £75 million to support the sector in this pivotal expansion year. We have also announced the largest ever uplift to the early years pupil premium. Early years is central to our mission to give every child the best start in life.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Early years providers are being hammered. In many cases, their national insurance costs per staff member are almost doubling. A large number are small businesses in the private sector, while others are schools that are taking children before they go into reception classes. All of them—both primary schools in the state sector and small private providers—are worried about the extra costs being imposed on them. Can the Minister assure my constituents and, indeed, people throughout the country that families will not face higher costs and that those childcare places will still be there? Can he assure the House that we will have more childcare places at the end of this Parliament than we had at the start of it?

Stephen Morgan: Unlike the Conservative party, we are on the side of working parents, and high-quality education will be available to every child. As for the hon. Gentleman's substantive point, it would help if the Conservatives were honest. They would not reverse the rise.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): The decision not to compensate nurseries for the national insurance increase has already pushed providers "to the brink", according to the Early Years Alliance, and many in schools, including schools with nurseries, are worried that they will be next. Local councils received a bill of £1.8 billion as a result of the national insurance increase, but received compensation for less than a third of that because the indirect costs were not covered. Can the Minister reassure the House that compensation for the increase will cover all the costs to schools, not just the direct costs?

Stephen Morgan: The Government have announced that public sector employers will receive compensation for the increase in their national insurance contributions, including school-based nurseries and maintained nursery schools, but in line with the arrangements for other areas, there will be no additional NICs funding beyond that.

Early Learning Goals

18. **Josh Simons** (Makerfield) (Lab): What steps she is taking to increase the number of children achieving the early learning goals. [902395]

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): Children growing up in our country deserve the best start in life—nothing less. Through our plan for change, Labour will get a record share of children school-ready. We will make that a reality through opening new school-based nurseries, rolling out childcare, earlier intervention, speech and language support, help for parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities, and wider SEND reform. That is rightly ambitious, and we are determined to deliver it.

Josh Simons: As a Jewish person, Mr Speaker, may I take this opportunity to thank you for everything you have done to help the House to remember my ancestors and those of other Jewish people whom we remember today?

Welcome funding was announced for Abram Bryn Gates school in Bamfurlong, in my constituency, in the last free school funding round, but the school has just been told that that funding has been paused, possibly until 2028. It is a really important school, because it provides support for kids to stay in mainstream education even when they have left. When can my constituents expect a decision to be made on the funding for this school?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is right to raise that issue on behalf of his constituents. I would be more than happy to meet him to discuss it further. We are working rapidly through the whole free schools pipeline to ensure that we are creating places where they are required—that includes specialist provision—and that there is a strong case and good value for the taxpayer.

Topical Questions

T1. [902401] **Mike Tapp** (Dover and Deal) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): Today marks the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. As the years slip away, our duty to remember only strengthens. I have had the privilege in recent months of listening to the powerful and deeply moving testimony of Holocaust survivors in person, including Renee Salt and Mala Tribich. It is vital that the world hears their voices—hears what happened to them and their families, and what happened to 6 million Jewish men, women and children during the Holocaust. That is especially important giving the shocking rise in antisemitic abuse that we have seen since 7 October. The Government could not feel more strongly about this, which is why we have confirmed that the Holocaust will be a compulsory topic in all schools following the completion of our curriculum and assessment review.

Mike Tapp: I recently launched an exciting new reading initiative across Dover and Deal called Tapp into Reading. We tour the schools and the children read theatrically from a VE Day text. This will end in May, at a theatre. Will the Education Secretary join the judging panel then?

Bridget Phillipson: That brilliant initiative shows what a champion my hon. Friend is for his constituents, and I will consider his request seriously. I would certainly be happy to visit his constituency soon and to work with him—perhaps also on how his local schools might be able to join the UK-Ukraine school partnerships programme, which is based on the power of reading.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): I associate myself with the right hon. Lady's words on Holocaust Memorial Day.

Just today, another voice came out against the disastrous academy proposals in the Government's Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill. The Children's Commissioner said in a scathing letter that ending the academy order to turn around failing schools will mean "children spending longer in failing schools".

The Secretary of State's own Back Benchers have said that ending the academy order would be a huge mistake and would weaken standards. Instead of running all her policy past unions, which are more interested in their own power than in teachers' pay, will the Education Secretary listen to the Children's Commissioner, her own Back Benchers and headteachers up and down the country when—

Mr Speaker: Order. *[Interruption.]* These are topical questions. If the hon. Member wants to ask long questions, she should do so under a substantive question. It has got to be speedy—punchy questions and sharp answers. Members have to help me.

Bridget Phillipson: It was a Labour Government who created the academies movement, and a Labour Government will ensure that they continue to flourish. The Conservative Government left a thousand failing schools that continue to let down more than 400,000 children year after year. We will intervene more rapidly and more effectively to turn that around. The Opposition have nothing to say on school standards; they are more interested in their own record than the best outcomes for children.

Laura Trott: The Education Secretary does not understand that her Bill will make things worse, not better. The legislation is in total chaos. At the Dispatch Box she said that pay will not be capped by the legislation, yet we now know that it will be. The Government cannot even do a U-turn correctly. Last week the Prime Minister told the Leader of the Opposition to read the pay amendment, but five days later the Government have still not tabled it. Can the Secretary of State tell me when it is going to come?

Bridget Phillipson: There was an awful lot in that but very little about how we deliver higher standards for our children, and that is what the Bill is all about. The only people in hock to vested interests are the Conservatives—more interested in defending school uniform racketeers and the private schools lobby than investing in our state schools.

T3. [902403] **Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab):** Widely accessible violent pornography is fuelling a culture of extreme misogyny and the normalisation of sexual violence and is warping the perceptions and attitudes of both young boys and girls to sex and healthy relationships.

What steps is the Secretary of State's Department taking to encourage schools to be proactive in combating the influence of online pornography and the harms experienced by young people as a result?

Bridget Phillipson: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend's concerns, and I am determined to tackle the scourge of misogyny. She brings experience to this place—

Mr Speaker: Order. Sorry about this, Secretary of State. Please, Members have to sit down. They cannot just remain standing up when the questions are being answered. Do we all understand? Great.

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend brings real expertise to this matter from her experience in education. We are reviewing the relationship, sex and health education guidance to ensure that schools are able to teach what children need to know in the modern world. Our school staff have a crucial role to play in tackling this issue as well.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Last week's National Audit Office report found £13.8 billion-worth of maintenance backlogs in our schools. With thousands of students who are taking A-levels and GCSEs studying in schools with crumbling reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete and the Joint Union Asbestos Committee warning that pupils and teachers face a tsunami of deaths after being exposed to asbestos on the school estate, what urgent steps are Ministers taking to ensure that our children and school staff can focus on teaching and learning and not have to worry about whether they are safe?

Bridget Phillipson: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Far too often our staff have had to focus on maintenance and buildings rather than driving up standards in our schools. The Conservatives talk about their record, but their record was children cowering under steel props because of the RAAC crisis that they left behind.

T4. [902404] **Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab):** This morning I visited Cledford primary school in Middlewich to speak in their school assembly. During my visit, the headteacher proudly showed me the school-based nursery that staff went above and beyond to get ready for the start of this term. Will the Minister join me in congratulating Cledford on getting the nursery up and running, and can he outline the role that school-based nurseries will play in helping children achieve their early learning goals?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan): High-quality childcare and early education is a crucial opportunity to transform life chances, but too often it is unavailable or unaffordable. That is why this Labour Government are committed to delivering additional places in new and expanded school-based nurseries. I congratulate my hon. Friend's school on the work it is doing. Our plans will benefit children and parents with high-quality and accessible provision.

T2. [902402] **Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD):** The Government's decision to make schools foot the bill for the teachers' pay award is pushing many schools closer to the brink. As the head of Richard Challoner school in my constituency told me, his and many other schools

are being forced to consider severe cuts to balance their budgets. What support will the Secretary of State give schools in those difficult circumstances?

Bridget Phillipson: I recognise the challenging context that many schools experience after 14 years under the Conservatives. At the Budget, notwithstanding the severe challenges that we face, the Chancellor prioritised key education areas, including making sure that we could deliver on that 5.5% pay award for teachers that the last Government refused to back.

T6. [902406] **Mr Alex Barros-Curtis** (Cardiff West) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. As a school governor, I recognise the importance of strong safeguarding measures to protect our children. Will the Minister reassure me that rather than play politics on this issue or pander to extremes, the Government will remain laser-focused on improving safeguarding in our schools?

Stephen Morgan: Protecting children is a cross-Government priority. Although the devolved nations have their own safeguarding systems, we will continue to work closely with them to ensure that safeguarding remains a priority and that we all engage with our schools to see where we need to strengthen our safeguarding support.

T7. [902407] **Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): A severe shortage of specialist provision and a council in dire financial straits is leaving children with severe levels of need in my constituency making four-hour round trips to school and back every day, which is too much for many of them to cope with. What steps is the Minister taking, working with local Government to reduce such journey times for children who simply cannot cope with them?

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell): The hon. Lady raises a really important point. No child should struggle to get to school because of a lack of transport, and no child should have to travel great distances if there could be an inclusive and appropriate place for them at their local mainstream school. That is what we are determined to deliver for all children, both to ensure that they get the best opportunities and for their families.

T8. [902408] **Mark Swards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): Springfield Training provides excellent opportunities in Leeds South West and Morley for young people not in work, training or education to do fulfilling apprenticeships. I have seen that in action myself. What is the Department doing to support such organisations to get young people into work?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): Independent training providers are an important part of the post-16 education landscape. They are funded to deliver the training that employers and learners need. That supports our plan for a youth guarantee to ensure that every young person can earn and learn. Springfield Training contributes to that effort, governed by our contractual relationship with commercial providers.

T10. [902410] **Pippa Heylings** (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): We know that early diagnosis is critical to effective SEND provision, but there is a national crisis in the number and availability of educational psychologists. Given that Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission are jointly investigating Cambridgeshire SEND services, will the Minister meet me and the council to discuss the outcome and actions from that?

Stephen Morgan: I thank the hon. Member for raising those matters. I would be happy to meet her to understand the issues in more detail.

T9. [902409] **Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Students at Sir Frederick Gibberd college in Harlow have been taught in marquees and portacabins for over a year after the previous Government wasted £29 million on a building that has since been deemed unsafe. What consideration will the Department give to support SFG college?

Stephen Morgan: I thank pupils, teachers and school leaders for their resilience since the original buildings were closed in August 2023. We have delivered high-quality temporary modular accommodation that the school will use until its new permanent buildings are ready. We will continue to work closely with the trust and the local community to find a permanent solution.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): When I worked at the University of Salford, I was proud to be part of the revolution in higher degree apprenticeships that saw thousands of people finding new technical careers following higher education. With unemployment rising and with recruitment agencies reporting significant reductions in job postings as companies squeeze their payroll following the Government's national insurance increases, what new measures are the Government taking to protect apprenticeship levels in this economic climate?

Janet Daby: After the Conservatives left us with a collapsing apprenticeship system as well as skills shortages, Labour has listened to employers and is redrawing the system through Skills England, a new growth and skills levy and new foundation apprenticeships.

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): To insulate our homes and build the 1.5 million we need, we will need far more construction workers—about 1 million over the next decade. What steps are we taking on apprenticeships and training to ensure that we have the construction workers we need?

Janet Daby: We are working across Government with the sector to put in place training schemes to build up the next generation of installers, including new apprenticeships for retrofit co-ordinators and installation technicians. As I mentioned, we have also established Skills England, which will form a coherent national picture of skill gaps and how they can be addressed.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I recently visited a school in my constituency in a building that is hundreds of years old. Its school condition allocation does not cover the work needed to keep the school warm, safe and up to date. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that classrooms in older buildings are fitted out?

Stephen Morgan: Ensuring that schools and colleges have the resources and buildings that they need is a key part of our mission to break down barriers to opportunity. I will be happy to meet the hon. Member to hear more about his concerns.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): Millmead children's centre in my constituency helps young people achieve their early learning goals and provides safeguarding services, and it has been doing so with deprived families for many years, yet although Kent county council has been given £4 million to protect family hubs, it is not protecting those services. Will the Minister explain to Kent county council that it should be finding the money for this vital service?

Janet Daby: I thank my hon. Friend for raising her concern so passionately. We are aware that Kent county council is taking the necessary steps to best meet the needs of families, and will continue to provide family hub services from existing alternative sites nearby. That said, I am happy to meet her to discuss the matter further.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): Wokingham borough council often struggles to find schools, including specialist schools, that can meet the needs of SEND pupils. As a result, many children are receiving education other than at school, or are reliant on alternative provision. Even so, there are often instances in which some needs identified in the EHCP are not met. Will the Minister—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry; it is meant to be a topical question. Somebody have a quick go at answering.

Catherine McKinnell: The Department for Education's regional team engage with Wokingham regularly to discuss its SEND provision, provide support and constructive challenge, and share best practice. That has included providing a DFE SEND adviser to work with Wokingham and support the local authority in improving its services.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): I recently visited Beaconsfield primary school in Ealing Southall, where teachers told me they have to fill in up to six forms to get disabled children the help they need. The time that takes is time they do not have, and they often need to choose which child to prioritise for support. How will the Minister reduce unnecessary paperwork and make it easier and more efficient for schools to ensure that every disabled child gets the educational support that they need?

Bridget Phillipson: Yet again we hear about the urgent need to reform our SEND system. We are determined to turn it around. We will work with everyone across the House and anyone with an interest in this area, including parents, teachers and staff, because we need to get this right.

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): For safeguarding purposes, a number of primary schools in my constituency now allow pupils to wear their PE kit all day on PE days, rather than getting them changed in school. What assurance and support will Ministers give those schools that are concerned about the changes to uniform policy that Labour is pushing through, particularly with respect to participation in PE?

Bridget Phillipson: There is no reason that schools should need to make any kind of change. Of course, headteachers make practical decisions about how they feel they should run their schools. We are cutting the cost to parents and putting more money back in their pockets, unlike the Conservative party, which seems to oppose practical, straightforward measures to cut the cost of school uniform.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Ensuring sensory and motor integration is crucial for a child's development and learning, yet many services that do so are available only in the private sector. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can ensure that parents can access those crucial services?

Catherine McKinnell: I know that my hon. Friend is a strong advocate for children with special educational needs and disabilities in her constituency, and I am happy to meet her to discuss the issue.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): The Children's Commissioner says that the Government are "legislating against the things we know work in schools".

Katharine Birbalsingh says the schools Bill is "catastrophic". Sir Dan Moynihan asks:

"Why are we doing this?"

Why does the Education Secretary think that she knows more about education than the Children's Commissioner, the head of the best school in the country, and the head of the best multi-academy trust?

Bridget Phillipson: This Labour Government are determined to deliver high and rising standards for all our children. The Conservatives left 1,000 failing schools, continuing to let down more than 400,000 children. They left one in three children leaving primary school without a firm foundation in English and maths, and one in five children regularly out of school. If they want to debate their record, I will do it any day of the week.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): Will the Minister meet me to discuss the SEND crisis in Suffolk Coastal? I have had over 100 families reach out to me since the general election to talk about their urgent needs and the crisis that they face because of Suffolk county council.

Catherine McKinnell: Yes.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): In Devon, only 4.9% of EHCPs are received within 20 weeks. Conservative-run Devon county council has been utterly failing our children for the past 10 years. Will the Minister meet me to discuss what more we can do to support the council and turn things around for families, like that of my constituent James, who has had to wait two and a half years for the test that he needs to get an EHCP?

Catherine McKinnell: Local authorities have been significantly impacted by the increased demand for EHCPs, and by workforce capacity issues. We know that they need a more effective and efficient service delivery for schools and families, and we are working as hard as we can to support local authorities in meeting their requirements in a timely way.

Fiscal Policy: Defence Spending

3.36 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the impact of Government fiscal policy on defence.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Luke Pollard): The Government's plan for change says that we will "set out the path to spending 2.5% of GDP on defence in the spring".

I am genuinely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for asking this urgent question. It gives me the opportunity to reiterate what the Prime Minister has said, what the Defence Secretary told the House on Wednesday last week, and what the Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry repeated in the House on Friday, which is that this Government have a cast-iron commitment to spending 2.5% of GDP on defence, and that we are already delivering for defence by increasing defence spending. At our first Budget, we announced an extra £3 billion on spending on defence in the next financial year.

James Cartlidge: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. Before I turn to the specifics, I hope you will indulge me and allow me to say on behalf of His Majesty's Opposition that we join all colleagues today in marking Holocaust Memorial Day. May we never forget or be complacent about the lessons.

Last Wednesday, the Defence Secretary stood at the Dispatch Box and laid bare the extent of the Russian grey zone threat. This is not a distant threat, but one that has been lurking in our own waters, threatening the United Kingdom and our critical infrastructure. I heard what the Secretary of State said, and responded by confirming that he had our full support in standing up to the Russians. I said that this showed why we urgently needed to increase defence spending. But there is one big problem. The rest of us were listening, but the Chancellor of the Exchequer was not. Despite all the evidence before our eyes of the growing threat, we learned this weekend from multiple sources that spending 2.5% will be delayed beyond 2030. Can the Minister disown such talk, and specifically confirm that we will hit 2.5% during this Parliament?

The Treasury is not just failing to back more defence spending; it is hitting our armed forces with higher taxes on death in service benefits and education. The Secretary of State confirmed on Friday that the application of inheritance tax to death in service benefits for the armed forces would go ahead. We understand that to be causing deep alarm throughout the forces community.

As for the education tax, we knew that the continuity of education allowance would not be uprated to 100% of the VAT impact, leaving many service personnel thousands of pounds out of pocket, so since the summer I have called for a full exemption for children of armed forces families. However, in a written answer to me in November on the continuity of education allowance and schools VAT, the Minister for Veterans and People said that

"the new VAT policy does not offer any exemptions".

Yet on Friday we learned that children of US armed forces families serving in this country and attending British independent schools are exempt from VAT on

their UK school fees. I do not begrudge them that—US forces are based in our country to defend us—but we want the same treatment for our people.

Finally, can the Minister confirm that the Secretary of State will bang on the door of No. 11 to demand, first, that the tax on death in service benefits be dropped and, secondly, that British forces families be treated the same as their American colleagues and granted a full exemption from education VAT? Is it not time that Labour backed our armed forces with action, rather than just words?

Luke Pollard: I agree with the hon. Gentleman's words about Holocaust Memorial Day. His Majesty the King has been in Auschwitz for the 80th anniversary, and he spoke for the nation when he said that we will remember this evil long after the survivors of the Holocaust have passed.

I have set out clearly that, in the spring, we will lay out a path to spending 2.5% of GDP on defence. We will also publish a strategic defence review, setting out what we will spend the money on and how we will respond to emerging threats. As the hon. Gentleman will know from the Defence Secretary's statement last week, we will make it absolutely clear to those who threaten us that we will use the formidable capabilities available to us to defend the UK and our allies.

We inherited a situation in which, during their entire time in power, not a single Conservative Government spent 2.5% of GDP on defence. The last time that 2.5% of GDP was spent on defence was under the last Labour Government. We have inherited falling morale; a retention and recruitment crisis; service personnel living in mouldy, broken homes; and a hollowed-out and underfunded military. That is what the SDR will seek to fix, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will be able to give us his full support.

Having listened to last week's debate, the hon. Gentleman will know that those who die on active service are exempt from the inheritance tax provisions. He will also know that the Defence Secretary has uplifted CEA support to 90% for those who privately educate their children while serving in the military. We will continue to support our armed forces, renewing the contract between the nation and those who serve. We will publish the defence review in the spring, when we will also set out our path to spending 2.5%.

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

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): We live in an increasingly volatile world, so I thank the Minister for his clarification on defence spending. Surely the cost of fighting a war, notwithstanding the human cost, is significantly higher than that of having a credible deterrent force. The Prime Minister recently told me at the Liaison Committee that the strategic defence review has to be completed before the path to 2.5% can be plotted, so why have there been discussions about the timeline for that path before the SDR has been published?

Luke Pollard: We have said that we will publish the strategic defence review in the spring, and we will also set out a path to spending 2.5% of GDP on defence in the spring. I do not recognise the publication timeline suggested by my hon. Friend, but he is right that

detering a war is cheaper than fighting one. That is why we are continuing to support our allies in Ukraine, and making sure that we have a NATO-first defence policy—to deter aggression facing the United Kingdom and our allies, and, if necessary, to defeat it with formidable capabilities.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): The Government's commitment to spending 2.5% of GDP on defence has been shrouded in delay and uncertainty. At a time when Europe faces its gravest security crisis in decades, this is unacceptable. Promises without a clear path are hollow, and the Government should commit to setting out by Easter a detailed and credible plan for reaching 2.5%.

We must also make the right spending decisions, and the House of Lords International Relations and Defence Committee has raised concerns about the capability of the British Army. What plans does the Minister have to reverse the previous Conservative Government's cuts to the Army? He mentioned retention, which is another critical issue. Improving the living conditions of our armed forces must be a priority if we are to attract and keep the talent we need.

Finally, the ongoing problems of inefficient defence procurement undermine our readiness, so what is the Minister doing to tackle those long-standing problems? The Government must stop dragging their heels, set out the pathway to 2.5% and end the uncertainty.

Luke Pollard: I have a lot of time for the hon. Lady, but we have been very clear and consistent that we will set out a path to spending 2.5% of GDP on defence in the spring. I remind her that when her party was in government, instead of increasing defence spending by £3 billion, as Labour did, the Liberal Democrats' and the Conservatives' first Budget cut defence spending by £2 billion, and cut it by 20% across the Parliament in which her party was in power. I support the hon. Lady in wanting a better deal for our forces, but I remind her to look in the rear-view mirror occasionally.

Mr Speaker: Order. While we are talking about mirrors, can the hon. Gentleman look at me occasionally, so he is not just staring one way?

Derek Twigg (Widnes and Halewood) (Lab): It is interesting that Members on the Opposition Front Bench seem to have forgotten that when they left office, they left us with the smallest Army since Napoleonic times, a lack of ships and aeroplanes, some of the poorest equipment and many problems with procurement. It is important that we keep to the timetable on the SDR, but given the rumours we are hearing and the stories in the press, will the Minister provide an assurance that he will keep this House fully informed on progress on the SDR, not provide that information through the press?

Luke Pollard: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that our armed forces were hollowed out and underfunded over the past 14 years of Conservative Government, but the Defence Secretary will come to the House to report the strategic defence review and announcements will be made by Government about the path to 2.5% of GDP.

I understand the enthusiasm, especially that of Conservative Members, to listen to anonymous briefings, but we have been clear that this Government will treat the House with respect. We will be in the House to make announcements on the SDR and on the path to 2.5% of GDP to be spent on defence.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I have a simple question: would it be compatible with the military covenant to make compensation payments to former members of the IRA?

Luke Pollard: That is not a matter for the Ministry of Defence and it is not within my portfolio, but if the hon. Gentleman writes to me, I will ensure Northern Ireland Office officials respond to him. However, I do not think there will be strong support for such action from much of the House.

Fred Thomas (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab): On our journey to increasing defence spending, it is crucial that we keep the public on side, especially given our dire financial inheritance from the Conservative party and the hollowed-out state of our armed forces, as Conservative Members have acknowledged. That is why I welcome the Government's break from tradition in informing this House and the British people about their steps to deploy a nuclear submarine to respond to Yantar, the Russian spy boat, along with the Plymouth-based RFA Proteus. What steps will the Government take in the future, over the coming weeks and months, to keep the British public informed, so that they stay on side as we increase defence spending to respond to the threat from Russia?

Luke Pollard: I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for his question. He is right that last week we declassified information about the activities of the Russian spy ship Yantar, including revealing details of the surfacing of a Royal Navy submarine to deter the Yantar's activities loitering above our critical national infrastructure. It is absolutely right that this Government make the case that warfare has changed, especially when it comes to the protection of our critical underwater infrastructure. Making the case that we have formidable abilities, but also being clear in the SDR about how we will invest in those capabilities alongside our allies, is essential. The SDR will be published in the spring, when I am sure he will be able to see more about that.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): I am going to surprise the Minister and say that I think he is right that the armed forces were not big enough when we left Government, and that every Chancellor since the end of the cold war slashed spending because it was the easy thing to do. Once the Ukraine war started, because of Russia's illegal invasion, we put tens of billions of pounds into the response, so my question to the Minister is simple: if the strategic defence review suggests that we have to spend more money, are we going to spend that money or will it be directed to ensure that the amount does not rise above 2.5%?

Luke Pollard: The right hon. Gentleman is certainly right that the forces were hollowed out and underfunded, which we are seeking to address by increasing defence spending. We have provided £3 billion in the Budget

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and the path to moving from 2.3% to 2.5% will be laid out in the spring. The SDR will set out what capabilities we need to have to meet the threat environment, against that pathway to spending 2.5% of GDP on defence.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The last Conservative Government did not spend 2.5 % of GDP on defence at any point during their 14 years of power. Unfortunately, the increase that will come will have to address a lot of the damage that that Government did to our Army, our Navy and our Air Force. Does the Minister agree that it takes a Labour Government to deliver those spending commitments?

Luke Pollard: It is certainly true that the last time this country spent 2.5% of GDP on defence was under a Labour Government. The Tories cut defence spending as a percentage of GDP over their time in power. It is important that the strategic defence review wins cross-party support when published. I hope that the shadow Defence Secretary will be able to offer the Government a common position, so that what is published will be not just Labour's defence strategy but Britain's defence strategy, and we can be strong at home as well as secure abroad.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): If Labour colleagues are going to insist on reiterating that the last time 2.5% of GDP was spent on defence it was by a Labour Government, I suppose I have to point out that the last time 3% was spent by any Government it was by a Conservative Government, and the last time 4% was spent by any Government it was by a Conservative Government. Both those figures were some time after the fall of the Berlin wall. When the Berlin wall was still up, under the present accounting system we were spending up to 5.5% on defence, so please can everyone stop obsessing about 2.5% and when it will come in, because we need a lot more?

Luke Pollard: I have a lot of time for the right hon. Gentleman. He did not plug his "Shifting the goalposts?" Defence Committee report, which clearly set out changes in GDP spend on defence. I believe that he used the report to argue for more defence spending when his party was in power. Now that we are in power, we are doing it: we increased defence spending by £3 billion in the Budget and will lay out a path to 2.5% in the spring.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Today is Holocaust Memorial Day. Does the Minister agree that this solemn day is a reminder of what we are fighting to defend, and the need to always protect our values and freedoms?

Luke Pollard: Today is a day when we remember not just all those who were killed in the Holocaust, but those killed in genocides since. It is a day when there is unity and cross-party support for tackling hate, in whatever form and wherever it comes from. It underlines why we must stand with our friends in these difficult times, why we need strong defence, and why we need to root out hate wherever it rears its ugly head.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Let me reiterate what the Minister is not quite saying: we are looking forward to a defence review that will set out what we need. It will not then be circumscribed as a percentage of GDP by some artificial ceiling; the

Government will spend whatever is necessary arising from the defence review, and his Department will send a defence review to the Treasury untrammelled by any spending constraint. We need to address the desperate threat situation that the country is in.

Luke Pollard: Lord Robertson is conducting the externally led strategic defence review based on the terms of reference that were agreed with the Secretary of State for Defence and the Prime Minister. Lord Robertson will publish it in the spring. I hope that the hon. Gentleman is looking forward to it as much as I am.

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): Under the last Government, only two out of 49 major defence projects were being delivered on time and on budget. Will the Minister set out what the Government are doing to get to grips with the financial mismanagement and failed procurement system that we inherited in defence?

Luke Pollard: It is certainly true that we inherited a broken defence procurement system; I think broken was the word that the shadow defence procurement Minister, the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), used when he was on the Defence Committee. It must make for awkward team meetings, given that the man responsible for the broken procurement system, the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), is sitting in those meetings as his boss. We have set out clearly that, as part of our defence reform work, we will create a new national armaments director. The new defence industrial strategy will be published in due course, which will set out how we will spend more with British companies, supporting not just the primes but small and medium-sized enterprises in all parts of the United Kingdom.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): Let me try to help the Minister understand where the Opposition's concern is coming from: it is because of the realisation, or suspicion, that the arbiter of when and how 2.5% is realised is not the Secretary of State for Defence but the Chancellor. This is a Chancellor who scarcely understands the fundamentals of economics, much less the fundamentals of defence and the threat environment that these islands face. What will the path to 2.5% look like? Is there a date, or is it when certain criteria are met? Also, the Minister be clear on who the final arbiter will be? Is the Treasury saying, "2.5% when you need it," or "2.5% when we decide it"?

Luke Pollard: The hon. Gentleman invites me to make the announcement that I am saying will come in the spring. To answer his concerns, I point him to the fact that the path to 2.5% will be set out in the spring.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): During my recent visit to Britannia Royal Naval College with the armed forces parliamentary scheme, I saw the vital role that investment in defence plays in supporting our armed forces and creating skilled jobs. Does the Minister agree that unlike the Conservatives' inconsistent defence strategy, this Labour Government's £9 billion investment in Rolls-Royce shows a clear commitment to strengthening our national security and growing our economy?

Luke Pollard: The armed forces parliamentary scheme is a brilliant scheme that introduces Members across this House to the important work done by our armed forces.

As a Navy brat myself and the proud MP for Devonport in Plymouth, I know the importance of a strong Royal Navy, Royal Marines and Royal Fleet Auxiliary. The £9 billion announcement last week is an important part of securing our nuclear future, backing jobs across the country and supporting jobs across the entire supply chain—it makes Britain stronger.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): The armed forces covenant is a promise—a promise that together we acknowledge and understand that those who serve or have served in the armed forces and their families, including the bereaved, should be treated with fairness and respect. How is the imposition of inheritance tax on death in service payments of some families of deceased soldiers fair and consistent with that?

Luke Pollard: It is certainly true that we have a manifesto commitment to put the armed forces covenant fully into law. That will come forward in the armed forces Bill in due course. We set out from the Dispatch Box last week that the inheritance tax does not apply to those members of our armed forces who die on active service. The other areas are subject to a Treasury consultation, and the Treasury will make an announcement in due course.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): Is it not the reality of the past 14 years that we have fewer soldiers and fewer Navy and Air Force personnel and that, in an uncertain world, we need to reverse that trend and grow our military forces to deal with those threats?

Luke Pollard: It is certainly true that this Government inherited an armed forces that, as world-class as they are, were struggling with falling morale, poor housing and capability gaps thanks to 14 years of underfunding and hollowing out. The strategic defence review will set out what capabilities we need to meet the threats, and the path to 2.5% will set out what will be spent on those capabilities. We also need to improve how we spend because the defence procurement system is broken—something that was well highlighted by the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) and the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) when they were in government. That will be fixed, and we will ensure that we have a strong set of armed forces able to deter aggression and defeat it if necessary.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The Minister says the strategic defence review will be announced in the spring, but is that the astronomical spring, which he will note ends on 21 June, or the meteorological spring, which ends, from memory, on 31 May? He talks about a “pathway to 2.5%”. That is a carefully crafted phrase from the Dispatch Box. Is the pathway short or long? Can he not give an answer to a straight question: when will we hear about 2.5%? When will it be announced? What is the date and the year?

Luke Pollard: The strategic defence review will be published in spring this year, and the path to 2.5% will also be announced in spring this year.

Dan Carden (Liverpool Walton) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister and his Department for setting out the need for increased defence spending because, like so many here, I believe we are living through a change

of era where the assumptions of globalisation and multilateralism are being refuted by reality, and it demands the renewal of our modern productive power in defence and the civil economy. The simple reality is to that build strong alliances, we must maintain and build our autonomy. Is it not the case that the one key fact about all this is that to maintain a good relationship with the United States, we will have to spend more on defence?

Luke Pollard: I agree with my hon. Friend that we have to spend more on defence. I think everyone in this House agrees with that, and that is why this Labour Government are spending more on defence: an extra £2.9 billion as announced in the Budget and a pathway to spending 2.5% of our GDP, which will be announced later in the spring.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): It was the Minister's assessment of costs that drove the decision to decommission Bulwark and Albion. But if the Brazilians are going to buy them, they cannot have been that bad, can they?

Luke Pollard: Let me say very clearly to the right hon. Gentleman that we inherited a position where it was not planned that Albion and Bulwark would go to sea for a single day before they were decommissioned—that was the plan we inherited from the Conservative Government. We are looking at new capabilities as part of the strategic defence review, and the Defence Secretary has also committed from this Dispatch Box to the multi-role supply ship project, to provide littoral and landing capabilities for our brilliant Royal Marines, who have a bright future in the strategic defence review.

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): I think both sides of the House can agree that our peace and security are founded on strong armed forces. Will the Minister therefore welcome the fact that we are spending £3 billion more on defence this year, as well as our firm commitment to get to 2.5% of GDP?

Luke Pollard: I agree that it is important that we spend more on defence. That is why the Chancellor laid out from this Dispatch Box that we will spend an additional £2.9 billion on defence in the next financial year. It is also why the Government have laid out our plan to renew the contract between the nation and those who serve. This is about not just kit and equipment but people. Addressing falling morale and poor-quality defence housing matter to our armed forces, and that is why this Labour Government are addressing those issues.

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): A trained and skilled workforce is central to a successful defence policy, and I saw that at first hand during my visit to RAF Valley, where I met Babcock apprentices who attend Grŵp Llandrillo Menai. The Babcock programme supports young people to develop skills, so can I ask the Secretary of State to ensure that any increase in defence spending includes significant investment in training and apprenticeships?

Luke Pollard: As someone who has a large Babcock premises in his own constituency in Devonport, I understand the importance of making sure that there is investment in skills. It is absolutely right that, just as we invest in the skills of our armed forces personnel, we also

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invest in the skills of the civilians who support them. That needs to happen not just in the primes but across the entire supply chain, and that is what is being set out in the defence review and the defence industrial strategy, which will be published in due course.

Josh Simons (Makerfield) (Lab): I am a strong supporter of making sure that we reach 2.5% of GDP on defence. However, may I remind Conservative Members that one of the first things this Government did was to scrap a £40 million contract with a helicopter company that transported Conservative Ministers around the country? Does the Minister agree that that will help to ensure that our defence spending goes on defending the nation, not on assuaging the egos of Conservative Members?

Luke Pollard: The shadow Defence Secretary was certainly a regular user of the helicopters, so he will be able to advise colleagues whether they were good value. It is true that the Government need to demonstrate our support for our armed forces. We are doing that by making sure that we invest more in defence, and we have also given our armed forces the largest pay rise in 20 years. Recruits' pay is up 34% under this Labour Government, and we are creating a new direct entry to cyber to make sure that we can get the people we need in the future. It is not just the kit and capability but the people that this Government are investing in, and we will continue to do so. I expect to see more of that in the defence review published in the spring.

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): I would like to see slightly more humility from all political parties on the subject of defence spending. [*Interruption.*] Thank you. The Minister is right that defence spending was cut under the coalition, but we are in a different world now, with a great power attacking Europe. I would also like to inform him that one of my best friends, Captain David Hicks MC, was killed in Afghanistan in 2007, in part because of the atrocious level of military kit provided to our armed forces there. So I think all political parties need to reflect on their records.

Luke Pollard: I think that the whole House will want to pass on its condolences to the hon. Gentleman and the family of Captain Hicks. It is right that one of the Government's objectives is to have a strategic defence review that is also the nation's defence review—one that is not just Labour's defence policy, but that can be supported cross-party. For that reason, I have laid out clearly the path and the timetable for our publication of the SDR and the 2.5% pathway in the spring. When that happens, I hope we can have a debate about how those capabilities match the threats and how we can support the SDR as a cross-party-backed defence review that gives our troops and our industry the direction and support they need to keep our nation safe.

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): On the Floor of the House today, the Minister has stated that he wishes to have more money for the armed forces, and he has been very critical of previous procurement exercises by the former Government. Can I therefore ask him whether he agrees that giving away the Chagos

islands, and paying to do so, is a bad deal, and that that money would be better spent on investing in our armed forces?

Luke Pollard: The hon. Gentleman might have missed the debate in which it was set out clearly that the deal we have secured to ensure the long-term future of the Chagos islands began under his Conservative Government—11 rounds of negotiations under the Conservative party, I think it was. The UK-US base on Diego Garcia is strategically important, which is why it is absolutely vital to secure its long-term future free from any constitutional threat. That is what the deal does, and I hope that when it comes before the House the hon. Gentleman will be able to back it, just as I will.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): Which comes first, the strategic and operational needs of our armed forces or fiscal parameters set by Treasury bureaucrats?

Luke Pollard: The strategic defence review will set out clearly what threats the nation is facing and what capabilities we need. I would expect to see renewal of our capabilities, because we have seen from the war in Ukraine that warfare has changed. Some of the assumptions about how we structure our armed forces and how we fight have been challenged by the experience of warfare in Ukraine, and that is one of the reasons why this SDR is so important. It will set out the evolving capabilities that we need and how we will deliver them to keep our nation safe.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): Given that the vast majority of the Ministry of Defence supply chain is in the private sector—for example, BAE Systems in Fylde at Warton and at Samlesbury, with jobs across Lancashire—and that those private companies have seen significant increases in costs following the Chancellor's Budget squeezing their payroll costs, as well as increasing regulation through the employment Bill and in other areas, we will be able to buy considerably less kit for 2.5% at the end of the defence review than at the start of it. As the Government go through the defence review process, are they cutting the shopping list or planning to go above 2.5%?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, and I support the work of the private sector businesses that do so much to support our armed forces. The needs of our armed forces will change and are changing; that means changed capability, but it also means a change in how we buy our kit. Certainly, if we look at some of the absolute procurement disasters under the last Government—only two of 49 defence procurement projects are on time and on budget—we see that we need not only to buy the right kit, but to buy it better. That is something that the last Government clearly failed to do; the shadow defence procurement Minister himself, the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford, described the defence procurement system as “broken”. We need to take steps forward, and the SDR and the defence industrial strategy will set out how we will improve defence procurement.

Mr Speaker: I call the new Member for Kent, Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I am the new Member for many places.

I thank the Minister very much for his answers. I ask him very respectfully whether he agrees that the story in the press this week about the proposed sale of Navy ships to Brazil, when our fleet already appears depleted, is worrying? There is a need to increase our defence spending, not simply to fulfil international obligations but to be in a position to defend ourselves in the frontier of the cyber-security world, and in the physical world as well. Will the Minister reassure this House that the decisions that are made have been future-proofed with our security in mind—the security of all of us in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—and prioritised as such?

Luke Pollard: That is precisely the reason why the Prime Minister commissioned the strategic defence review within two weeks of coming to office, to assess the changing context that we are facing but also the changing capabilities that we need, as a nation, to keep us safe. That includes retiring old capabilities, especially capabilities that were never planned to go to sea again—a decision made under the last Government. We have already increased defence spending in the Budget—it is up by £2.9 billion—and we will set out a path towards spending 2.5% of GDP on defence in the spring.

Storm Éowyn

4.9 pm

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (Pat McFadden): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the Government's response to Storm Éowyn.

On Thursday of last week, the Met Office issued two red weather warnings for Storm Éowyn, meaning there was danger to life across Northern Ireland and central and southern Scotland. As a result, and in consultation with the Scottish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive, I approved a decision to issue an emergency mobile phone alert containing information about the weather warnings and guidance on how to stay as safe as possible to approximately 4.5 million people across Northern Ireland and Scotland. This was the largest real-life use of the emergency alert system to date.

On Friday morning, Storm Éowyn brought extremely strong winds to different parts of the UK, with gusts exceeding 92 mph in Northern Ireland. Initial observations from the Met Office say it was “probably the strongest storm” to hit the UK in at least 10 years and the most severe storm for Northern Ireland since 1998. Very sadly, we have had reports so far of two deaths during the storm—a young man in Scotland and a young man in the Republic of Ireland. Our thoughts are with and our condolences go to their families.

The storm caused widespread property damage and significant disruption to transport and power supplies, particularly in Northern Ireland and Scotland. At its peak, 285,000 properties in Northern Ireland—that is about a quarter of the population—and around 290,000 properties in Scotland lost power. More than 95% of the customers in Scotland have had their power restored. Work is continuing to bring that number down. In England and Wales, around 325,000 properties lost supply, and the vast majority have been reconnected.

As a result of the power outages, disruption to telecoms was reported by mobile phone operators in the areas affected. Significant impacts were also felt across the rail and road networks, with train services cancelled, and Edinburgh airport and both Belfast airports suspending operations on Friday. Also on Friday, all schools in Northern Ireland were closed, as were almost 90% of Scotland's schools, and all colleges and universities. In England, there was also a smaller number of school closures. As a result of the storm, around 3,000 properties in Northern Ireland are experiencing disruption to water supplies, and supplies of bottled water are en route to Northern Ireland.

I want to thank the emergency services, the engineers and others who have worked tirelessly and with great courage in the face of extremely difficult weather conditions. They put in a huge effort to provide support to those who have needed it to restore power, repair damage and clear roads and railways. I know the whole House will join me in thanking them for their work.

The Scottish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive have led the response efforts in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and there has been good co-operation between the UK Government and the devolved Governments over the past few days. We remain in regular contact to assess the situation and see what more needs to be done. On Saturday, the Prime Minister

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spoke to the Scottish First Minister and the Northern Ireland First Minister and Deputy First Minister to offer any support that the UK Government could provide. Today, the Prime Minister has also spoken to the Taoiseach and discussed the latest situation in the Republic of Ireland.

Over the weekend, I chaired a ministerial Cobra meeting with relevant Cabinet colleagues as well as the First Minister of Scotland and the First Minister and Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland. I reiterated the Prime Minister's offer of assistance, and we discussed the practical support that the UK Government could provide. Under industry arrangements, electricity network operators have facilitated mutual aid, and 102 engineers with equipment have travelled to Northern Ireland to support power restoration. Northern Ireland has requested specific mutual aid from Great Britain in the form not only of engineers, but of helicopters, generators and batteries, as well as equipment more widely, including chainsaws and vehicles.

UK Government Departments are moving as quickly as they can to meet these requests. We believe the majority of requests can be met through either the usual mutual aid channels or, in some cases, commercial arrangements with industry. The Cobra unit in my Department, which has met twice over the weekend at official level and once again this morning, is continuing to co-ordinate the support to ensure it is provided as swiftly as possible.

I have met Cobra officials several times to review the situation and ensure that we are doing all we can to support those affected. The message has been simple: to get as much help as quickly as possible to where it is needed. The situation on the ground is improving, but it is estimated that it could be up to 10 days before everyone is reconnected—a long time. This is very serious and we are working as hard as we can to accelerate the restoration of power.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is today in Northern Ireland, where he has met the Minister for Infrastructure to discuss recovery, and residents impacted by the storm. The Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks) is in Scotland this afternoon, meeting staff who are working on reconnections. Since Friday, around 220,000 properties in Northern Ireland, and 600,000 across Great Britain, have had their power restored. Welfare provisions have been provided to households without power, travel disruption has eased, most schools in Northern Ireland have reopened today, and we hope that the majority of the remainder will reopen tomorrow.

However, the situation remains serious and there is a need for ongoing help. In Northern Ireland an estimated 60,000 properties are still without power, as are around 7,500 in Scotland. Northern Ireland electricity networks expect to restore power to the vast majority of homes and businesses over the coming days, and we will continue to provide additional support that may be needed to accelerate that reconnection for as many households as possible.

Storm Éowyn has now moved away from the UK, but another storm, which the Spanish Met Office has named Storm Herminia, has brought heavy bands of rain to south-west England and Wales. A number of properties have been flooded, and 35,000 properties lost power,

although the majority of those have now had it restored. We expect the impact of this storm to be significantly less than that of Storm Éowyn.

I hope this statement underscores the seriousness and urgency with which the Government are working to address the destruction that Storm Éowyn has wrought. In the days ahead we will continue to work closely with our colleagues in the devolved Governments, particularly in Northern Ireland, which has been worst hit in this situation, to ensure that all households are reconnected as soon as possible, and that full support is provided to affected households in the meantime. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

4.17 pm

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): I thank the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster for his statement and for providing advance sight of it. I pay tribute to all the emergency services, responders and volunteers who have undertaken, and continue to undertake, action in response to Storm Éowyn. We join the Minister in sending our deepest condolences to those families who are grieving after the tragic deaths in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland.

Red weather warnings are rarely issued, and Storm Éowyn is certainly the worst of its kind for some time. It highlights the importance of work to strengthen preparedness and resilience across the board. I understand that the Government will be undertaking a pandemic preparedness exercise later this year. Are there any plans to undertake a similar exercise for storms and adverse weather, particularly focusing on the use of the emergency alert system that was introduced by the previous Government, its effectiveness, and the protection of critical infrastructure?

On critical infrastructure, in relation to water, what can the UK Government do to help ensure the resilience of those systems that went down over the weekend into the future? Much of the damage has been caused, or worsened, by extensive flooding. I recognise that the Government have established the floods resilience taskforce, but reports suggest that it has met just once since July. That is disappointing, if true, and I hope that the Secretary of State will clarify what actions were taken up as a result of that meeting.

As communities seek to recover and rebuild after Storm Éowyn, many face being hit again by Storm Herminia. What preparations are in place for that storm, and what flooding response preparations are now in place after the weekend?

Storm Éowyn has caused enormous damage right across the United Kingdom, as the Secretary of State said, but Scotland and Northern Ireland were particularly hard-hit. It is imperative that the Government fully understand the challenges faced by devolved authorities in providing adequate funding for storm and flooding preparedness, as well as response. I would appreciate clarity from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster on what work is being taken forward under the proper agreements to ensure progress on that.

I would also appreciate clarity on what discussions were held with the devolved Administrations ahead of the storm to co-ordinate responses and ensure that the

proper preparations were in place. As the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster set out in his statement, winds of more than 90 mph left a quarter of all homes in Northern Ireland, as well as many businesses, without power. Labour made a commitment in its manifesto to support the Northern Ireland Executive to improve public services in the Province. If ever there was a test of the Government's commitment to supporting the Executive and public services in Northern Ireland, it is now, after this horrific storm.

We understand that, under mutual aid arrangements, the UK Government are providing some targeted support to Northern Ireland. Can the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster unpack that further? I think he said in his statement that 102 engineers from Great Britain were currently in Northern Ireland to get power restored to affected communities. Can he confirm that figure? How many more are due to arrive, and when will they arrive? Can he confirm, given the increased frequency of this type of weather incident, what action he is taking to ensure that Northern Ireland Electricity has the in-house skills and capacity needed to respond to similar events in future? Is NHS England offering any support to the health service in Northern Ireland?

Storm Éowyn hit every nation in our United Kingdom. We have seen travel and power problems, along with the tragic loss of young life in Scotland. In Wales, the storm has prompted school closures and yet more outages. Can the Minister assure the House that he is impressing upon his colleagues in Cardiff Bay and Holyrood the need to make sure that local authorities and local health boards are properly resourced to deliver preparedness and resilience services in their communities, using the record block grants provided by the previous Government and the package announced by the Chancellor in last autumn's Budget? Our thoughts and prayers are with all those communities affected by Storm Éowyn and with all those working so tirelessly to help them.

Pat McFadden: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his response and, in particular, for his tribute to the emergency service workers and engineers who have worked so hard over recent days. He asked a number of questions, and I will try to go through them.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether there would be a further test of the national emergency alert system. Yes, there will be. I announced that to the House about 10 days ago. There will be a second nationwide test later this year. He asked about resilience meetings. I can assure him that there has been more than one meeting on resilience over the past seven months, and I take part in them regularly. He asked about co-operation with the devolved Governments. There has been good co-operation with the devolved Governments in recent days both at the official level—we have had regular contact over the weekend—and also at the ministerial Cobra meeting that I chaired on Saturday evening, which involved the First Minister and Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland and the First Minister of Scotland.

The hon. Gentleman asked about financial support. Both Northern Ireland and Scotland received significant increases in their budgets. I am pleased that he acknowledged—a rare acknowledgment from the Opposition Front Bench—the generosity of the settlement as a result of the Budget from my right hon. Friend the Chancellor a few

months ago. He asked about the number of engineers. The latest figure I have is 102, but the number moves around.

As I said in my statement, we have had two storms and floods and power outages in different parts of the country. The principal that my officials and I have tried to instil is this: as much help as possible, as quickly as possible, to the areas where it is needed. That is what has driven our response over the weekend and through today.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): Storm Éowyn caused real damage to homes and property in my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie), who has a family emergency today but with whom I worked closely over the weekend. The costs include significant losses to the economy, after many businesses had to close on Friday. Around 15,000 people lost power across Fife in freezing conditions. I thank the ScottishPower engineers and all those who worked hard in dangerous conditions to get power restored and to care for others. However, some, including older and vulnerable people, on the outskirts of Aberdour, Burntisland, Cowdenbeath and Auchtertool are still without power.

I was closely engaged with many constituents over the weekend, ensuring that a generator was brought to a care home without power in Auchtertool on Saturday. I thank the Windsor hotel in Kirkcaldy and the Woodside hotel in Cowdenbeath, who accommodated people hit by the storm at no cost. Such acts of community solidarity are priceless in times of need. Does the Minister agree that lessons from the response to Storm Éowyn must be learned and implemented, as climate change will bring more extreme weather events? They include the effectiveness of the priority services register, reliance on phoning 105 when people have no mobile phone battery or working phone line, and more preparatory work by the Scottish Government and local authorities to get resources and support to communities.

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I echo her thanks to those who have extended premises or help to their neighbours in these difficult times. These events can be very difficult, but they also show the best of society, such as the hotels in Fife that she mentioned. We are constantly learning and adapting from different emergencies and trying to improve our processes. In recent days I have been impressed by the speed with which mutual aid arrangements have worked. It is never perfect, but we will keep trying to learn and improve as these situations arise.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I thank the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster for advance sight of his statement and for his thoughtful presentation of it. As he said, Storm Éowyn may well have been the strongest storm to hit the United Kingdom in 10 years. Sadly, it is a sign of what is likely to come. I am praying for those who are grieving those who have died, and I pay tribute, alongside everyone else in every corner of this House, to all who worked throughout the weekend to support others, often at great cost and even risk to themselves.

Back home, communities such as Patterdale, Flookburgh, Cark, Shap, Tebay, Crosby Ravensworth, Witherslack and Bouth saw many homes, businesses and community centres lose power. Like others, I am incredibly grateful to the engineers at Electricity North West and the wider

[Tim Farron]

community groups who have worked tirelessly to reconnect residents and support those without power. I want to mention the Commodore Inn at Grange over Sands, the Kings Arms at Stainton, the Watermill at Ings and the Kings Head at Ravenstonedale, which provided shelter, food and drink to residents hit by the power cuts.

Storms are becoming more commonplace and severe, and the damage that they leave behind all the more troubling and increasing. Four days on, tens of thousands of homes across the British Isles are still without power, and transport networks remain badly hit. The Government's failure at the recent Budget to guarantee funding for flood defences beyond this coming financial year is a cause of great anxiety for communities such as mine, who are often the first to be hit by extreme weather events. It also strikes me as extraordinarily short-sighted. Will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster demand that the Chancellor of the Exchequer puts this right, and quickly?

Farmers are our crucial ally in the fight to build more storm-resilient communities. Will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster get the Treasury to ringfence funding, in addition to the environmental land management budget, to support farmers to protect our villages, towns and cities through natural flood management? Farmers are also major victims of these storms, with crops and livestock tragically lost and equipment destroyed.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The hon. Gentleman will know that there is a two-minute limit.

Tim Farron: Have I gone over it?

Madam Deputy Speaker: By some 10%. Perhaps he will make this a very short final sentence.

Tim Farron: Will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster ensure that resilience funding goes to the farmers who need it? Finally, will he meet the electricity companies to consider how they can improve the resilience of power lines?

Pat McFadden: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his questions, and I echo his thanks to those who have helped so many over the past few days. He is right that these storms seem to be becoming more frequent. If he wants more money for flood defences, he of course must support the revenue raisers that go towards that money—I hope there will be consistency on that. I also echo his thanks to farmers for their efforts in difficult times such as these. We know they can be very hard hit by the kind of weather we have seen over the weekend.

Markus Campbell-Savours (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): This weekend, Cumbria was hammered by Storm Éowyn. I must compliment the hundreds of local authority staff and contractors who worked day and night to deal with hundreds of incidents of fallen trees and damage to power lines and buildings, but I note that many of my residents are still waiting for power to be restored. Will the Government consider the eligibility criteria for the Bellwin scheme and whether it truly supports the emergency response costs, which will very likely run to seven figures for each of Cumbria's two unitary authorities?

Pat McFadden: We do not have plans to revise the Bellwin scheme right now, but we are working very hard to restore power to people in my hon. Friend's area and in any other area where power has still not been restored. A huge effort has gone into this work in recent days and hundreds of thousands of homes have been reconnected, but the worst of it is still in Northern Ireland, where some 60,000 are without power.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): My constituency was very significantly impacted by the storm, and we were just grateful there was no loss of life. That is why I was particularly sorry to hear about the young man in Mauchline; my condolences go out to his family. I pay tribute to all the emergency services, local authorities and everybody at ScottishPower who has done so much to restore the network—I will be even more grateful to them if they abide by their promise and get the village of Skirling back on the network tonight.

The one issue that has come up in this emergency, as in so many others, is the importance of contact with the elderly and vulnerable and of having an effective system for that contact. Inevitably, people who have not previously been identified do emerge. However, despite all the lessons from previous incidents, I do not believe we have a sufficiently effective system to identify the people who will be most in need in such circumstances.

Pat McFadden: The right hon. Gentleman is quite right to say that contact with the elderly and the vulnerable is important. The priority services register is a pre-registration system for emergency events such as the storm, and I encourage anybody in that category who has not used it to register in advance. It gives the power companies much better information about exactly who is vulnerable in situations where the power is cut off.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I begin by paying tribute to all those across Hexham, including local authority staff and members of the community, who helped out during the storm. As the Government conduct the national resilience review, will my right hon. Friend ensure that the needs of our most isolated and rural communities are prioritised when considering these kinds of events, which are becoming far more common?

Pat McFadden: It is really important for our national solidarity that when the resilience review is published in the spring, it does exactly what my hon. Friend says: it must consider resilience in not only the urban areas, but the isolated areas, which can often be the hardest hit, and are often hit for the longest time, when we have such emergencies.

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): I offer my sympathies to everyone who has been severely affected by Storm Éowyn, and in particular those who have lost loved ones. I share the Minister's acknowledgment of the work that has been and continues to be done in the aftermath of the storm. Huge thanks go to Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks, the ScottishPower emergency network, our local authority, staff at Openreach, our road and rail teams and all the emergency services for the way they have handled and responded to this weather emergency.

I have a couple of specific questions. Will the Minister commit to reviewing the operation of battery back-up phones, which are replacing phones on the copper wire network, including whether they are effective in a power outage, particularly in places where the power is off for long periods of time? Make no mistake: this weather event was caused by climate change and is yet another warning—if one were needed—against rowing back on our net zero commitments. Will the Minister acknowledge that and redouble efforts to tackle carbon emissions in an effort to protect future generations from the most extreme scenarios that we might face?

Pat McFadden: The hon. Member is right to point out that as technology changes and phone technology changes, we must not end up increasing our vulnerability. It is really important that regulators and phone companies consider that as those changes go through. Our commitments to the energy transition remain as they were. It is a big priority for us to increase our energy security as we move through the coming years.

Fred Thomas (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab): Over the past few days we have seen three notable things happen: Storm Éowyn has had tragic consequences; the CIA has announced that it thinks it is more likely that covid came from a Chinese laboratory than from animals—that is, it thinks it more likely that it was made on purpose; and the Russians, quite blatantly, put a spy boat in UK waters and the Defence Secretary announced in this place that we had deployed a nuclear submarine to surface nearby to see it off. Resilience is a huge topic. Does the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster agree that siloing resilience in the Cabinet Office, security in the Home Office and defence in the Ministry of Defence might not be the way to go in the future, and that we need to think of these things as very much connected?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is right that those things are connected, but using the example of recent days, I can see advantage in the Cobra team's role. Requests came in that involved help from several Government Departments. The important thing in a situation like that is that they are not just dissipated around Departments, but someone at the centre holds the ring, drives progress and makes sure it is pulled together. That is precisely the role the Cabinet Office and Cobra officials played in recent days. I believe there is value in someone holding the ring and driving progress in that way.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I add my tribute and thanks to the emergency services, core workers and care workers who were on the ground over the weekend, and to those providing welfare in our churches and halls of all creeds—the Orange halls and the Gaelic Athletic Association centres—which opened their doors for our local communities. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster mentioned that 60,000 properties are still without electricity, but more individuals are affected. Our pensioners, young people, mothers and children are still waiting for their power to be supplied, and some are still waiting for water to be reconnected to their homes as well.

I thank the Government for their assistance to the Northern Ireland Executive, but did the Chancellor, in his Cobra meetings, have the feeling that the Executive were prepared enough for what was coming, rather than simply asking the UK Government for assistance? When the

statement says that the Northern Ireland Executive were asking for things like chainsaws, it concerns me that more could have been done by our Executive to prepare for what was coming.

Pat McFadden: Let me echo what the hon. Gentleman says about different parts of the community who opened their doors to help their neighbours—he is absolutely right about that. On the Northern Ireland Executive, I actually want to pay tribute to the role played by the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and the Executive in recent days. As I said, we believe it was the worst storm to affect Northern Ireland since 1998 or thereabouts. This is an emergency and a time when people in different parts of the country should pull together. I was very happy to chair a Cobra meeting and do whatever else—other calls over the weekend—to make sure that we got as much help to Northern Ireland as quickly as we could to where it was needed. I will continue to do that over the next few days.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): Whether our constituencies are rural or urban, the destruction that we saw last week should remind us of the need for urgent climate action. In the summer of 2021, my constituency experienced an extreme rainstorm, and homes in south Hampstead were invaded by water and raw sewage. One of my constituents, a recovering stroke victim, was left on the street with nothing but a small bag of belongings, and is now homeless. The same area was flooded in 2002 and in 1975, but no drainage improvements have been made. Can my right hon. Friend, who knows my constituency well, confirm that drainage infrastructure will be included in the Government's resilience review?

Pat McFadden: I can certainly confirm that the risk of flooding and extreme weather events will be covered in the review. It is important that we publish a national risk register that is updated constantly: we published our latest version just 10 days ago. As climate changes—and, indeed, as terrorism and other threats change—it is especially important, when we are considering resilience and how we should prepare and protect the country, that we are not caught in the past but look to the way in which the world is changing.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): I echo the tributes to the emergency services and all those who have been out trying to keep people safe. It is particularly poignant for all of us on the Fylde coast who, each year, mark our police officers who have lost their lives rescuing people during stormy conditions. Two things are noticeable to those who visit Fylde: it is beautiful, and it is very flat. As it is a coastal constituency, that means that during storms, the wind reaches particularly high levels, while the water that is trying to get into the sea from the hillier parts of Lancashire slows down and does not leave the area so quickly, making it more prone to flooding.

I met representatives of the Environment Agency on Friday to discuss these issues in the midst of the storm. One problem concerns the pumping station at Lytham, which, like many others, has a funding allocation to pump water out to the river system when there is an immediate threat to life or residences but not necessarily when water is already backlogging on to farm and agricultural land across the area, which will cause further

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risks if that then creates a breach. May I ask two very brief questions? First, will there be a review of that funding from the Environment Agency. Can the Minister confirm the timelines for that? Secondly, when will the sustainable drainage systems legislation come into force?

Pat McFadden: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman's constituency is beautiful and flat, and he is right to pay tribute to it. As for the funding for pumping stations or anything else, of course we want the right resources to be there, but I must gently say to Opposition Members that if they are going to call for more funding for things, they will have to support the revenue-raising measures that enable the Government to provide it. We cannot have a situation in which Members oppose every revenue-raising measure and then call for more funding in response to every statement.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): Let me echo others in thanking the emergency services and the power companies for the job that they have done over the past few days, certainly in my constituency. We lost power in some areas for a while, and school buildings have been damaged and are being looked at as we speak. I welcome the review that the Minister mentioned, but will he look at safeguards within the emergency alert system? The current system might not be ideal for domestic abuse victims or those suffering from hearing impairments.

Pat McFadden: I gather that the first time the emergency alert system was tested, under the last Government, there was an effort to inform organisations that had contact with victims of domestic abuse, because we are aware of issues in that regard and we have to think as much as possible about who might be affected; but I think that, overall, the system has benefits. These alerts are not issued easily, and the latest was issued in response to a very rare red "danger to life" weather warning which affected the whole of Northern Ireland and most of the central belt of Scotland, as well as some other parts. We do not do this lightly, but when we do it, I think it is a useful system. However, if there are any lessons to be learned about how it is being used, of course we should learn them.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster for his clear commitment to making things better. Northern Ireland and Strangford has been in the eye of the storm, and over the weekend it was incredible. There were whole villages with no electricity, including Ballywalter, Greyabbey and Kircubbin, as well as parts of Ards and parts of Comber and Killyleagh. Indeed, Killinchy is still without electricity. Trees are blocking roads all over the place, and there is no information about them being cleared. There are pensioners with no access to phone, light or heat, and many pensioners have gone up to 36 hours with no heat in their homes. Those pensioners, by the way, are prioritised by Northern Ireland Electricity for generators or some method of heating.

I thank all the workers who came out in the worst of the storm and who are working hard, but the NIE helpline—what a disaster. People have had to wait 45 minutes for replies and have got recorded messages. I think it started to improve only today—maybe yesterday—probably

due to the intervention of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the Executive. Has he had any discussions with the Executive about prioritising pensioners' homes? The storm has left them incredibly vulnerable and wondering how to cope with the unknown. Waiting until 3 or 4 February to get the electric fixed is not satisfactory; that has to be sorted out. My people in Strangford want action right now, not on 3 or 4 February.

Pat McFadden: The hon. Gentleman is quite right to outline the situation and the consequences for his constituents. I totally share his concern about the prospect of people being without power for 10 days—as I said in my opening statement, that is too long—and that is why we are trying to get as much help to Northern Ireland as quickly as possible to see whether we can reduce that time.

The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the plight of pensioners, who will be vulnerable in this situation. We are getting as much help as we can to people on the ground. The engineers are working under difficult circumstances, and I support what they are doing, but we are here to help as much as we can with his constituents. It is Northern Ireland that has had the worst of the storm, and it is Northern Ireland where the focus of our help effort is concentrated.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): We have had terrible flooding in my constituency because of Storm Éowyn. As I drove through my home village of Bampton yesterday, I saw an elderly resident—Richard Hutter—desperately trying to pull up the drain so that the water could be taken from the high street. The wall between Withycombe and Rodhuish has fallen into the stream, so there is water all over the roads. At Exebridge, where the silt has not been taken out from under the bridges for years, there is flooding again—for probably the 10th time.

Nearly a decade of underfunding at the hands of the Conservative Administration, which oversaw a 45% cut in the local government settlement, has exacerbated subsidence, erosion and poor road conditions. That has had dangerous consequences, as we have witnessed over the past few days. I ask this question more in hope than in expectation: will the Government revise the funding mechanisms for local government to ensure that villages such as those in Tiverton and Minehead are better protected from future adverse weather?

Pat McFadden: My sympathies go out to the hon. Lady's constituents—flooding is devastating for those who are affected by it—and I understand what she said about the consequences. I note what she said about funding. We have a better settlement for local authorities this year than they have had in recent years, but I must say to her what I also said to Conservative Members: all appeals for more funding, to be consistent, must be matched by consistent support for the revenue measures needed to raise that money in the first place.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): First, I thank the many workers who have worked tirelessly in treacherous conditions to restore power. I watched them on Saturday afternoon and Sunday. Equally, I give sincere thanks to the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster for the work that he did. I know from speaking to the Deputy First

Minister over the weekend and this morning before coming to the House that she was very pleased with the response, effort and commitment that he has shown to the people of Northern Ireland. That is an indication of how, by being part of the United Kingdom, we can draw on wider resources where there is willingness to do so.

However, there are still many people without power in Northern Ireland. Many people find it incomprehensible that some of the resources being sent to Northern Ireland are going to the Republic rather than being used in Northern Ireland. Will the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster address that? An increase in the number of generators, people to fit them and so on would enable people who need machines for health and other reasons to have supply in their homes ahead of power being restored.

Pat McFadden: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his kind comments. Of course I take this seriously. As I said to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), we want to do everything we can to get power restored for people who are without it. According to the latest figures I have seen, we have sent more than 100 engineers to Northern Ireland. That number will move. The electricity grids of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are physically linked, so sometimes it might make sense in connecting people to work on both sides of the border. We will respond as positively as we can to requests for generators to get help to people who need it.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): I join others in expressing the appreciation of the whole community for the hard work in the most difficult circumstances of those who have been trying to reconnect us. I also join in the condolences to the families of those who have lost their lives, including the family of a young father just outside my constituency who lost his life in an incident with a generator. I know personally some of his close relatives, and the devastation is incredible.

On the issue of mutual aid, which is more than welcome, can the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster tell us who pays for it, ultimately? Does the Treasury pick up the bill, or is the bill for the engineers, generators, chainsaws and all the rest of it ultimately passed to the Northern Ireland Executive, who seem to have been pretty ill-prepared given that they have had to go looking for chainsaws?

Pat McFadden: I add my condolences to the family of the person the hon. and learned Gentleman referred to close to his constituency, and to the families of anyone who has lost their life as a consequence of what has happened in recent days. I have to be candid with him: when I have been discussing requests for help for people in Northern Ireland, I have focused not on arguing about the bill, but on getting the generators, engineers, helicopters and other help that is needed, because when people are without power, they want the help as quickly as possible.

Point of Order

4.53 pm

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. My point of order relates to comments by Ministers on their plans to impose local government restructuring.

At oral questions on 20 January, the Minister for Local Government and English Devolution asserted:

"The Government are not requiring any area to reorganise...this is a bottom-up reorganisation being requested by local councils".— [*Official Report*, 20 January 2025; Vol. 760, c. 720-721.]

However, in answer to a written question on 16 January, the same Minister wrote:

"All levels of local government have a part to play in bringing improved structures to their area through reorganisation, and we expect all councils in an area to work together to develop unitary proposals".

Labour's devolution White Paper also pledges to legislate to create a ministerial direction power to force such restructuring through. This is not bottom-up reorganisation.

Ministers have an obligation under the 1997 resolution on ministerial accountability to give accurate answers to Parliament. I seek your advice, Madam Deputy Speaker, on whether contradictory answers are compatible with that resolution.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Gentleman for providing prior notice of his point of order. As he will know, I am not responsible for ministerial answers to questions, but he has put his point on the record very clearly and I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have noted his comments.

Creative Industries

4.54 pm

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the creative industries.

I have of course noted the point of order that was just raised, and I will pass on the comments and make sure that an answer is provided. I should declare an interest of my own in this debate. Two of my books are optioned, one to Mother Films and another to Pathé, so if we stray into talking about film and high-end television, I will have to be careful. *[Interruption.]* Have Members come across Paddington and his stare before?

The UK is home to world-class creative industries; I think we can all agree about that. Every single day, our arts and culture bring joy to millions of people, not just in our four nations but all over the world. They are part of our soft power, part of our economic power and part of the joy that we give to the world. They enrich our lives, they bring our communities together and they drive our economy. These are industries powered by extraordinary artists, musicians, dancers, publishers, architects and game designers who, year after year, find ways to break out of the straitjacket of conformity. I know this because on Saturday night I went to see the Matthew Bourne version of “Swan Lake”, and if that is not an example of people breaking out of the straitjacket of conformity, I do not know what is.

While Governments of every stripe have appreciated the social value of our creative industries—some more than others—many have underpriced the huge economic potential of industries that are already among our most powerful engines of growth. This Government understand the true economic value that these industries have now and can have in the future. They generated £125 billion for the economy in 2023. They account for one in 14 jobs across the country now, and I would guess that by 2029 that will be one in 10. They have shown growth at one and a half times the rate of the rest of our economy in the past decade, despite all the economic headwinds they and we have faced. Today, we are the third largest art market in the world, larger than all the European art markets combined, and I want to make sure that we remain at the top of that list. Only the USA exports more advertising than us, and nobody exports more books than us—although not necessarily mine.

To put this in perspective, our creative industries were worth more to the economy in 2022 than three of our heavyweight sectors— aerospace, life sciences and automotive industries—combined. When we think about growth, our first thought should therefore be of the creative industries, and I am proud that that is precisely how this Government are viewing them. I would argue that these industries have managed all this in spite of, not always in partnership with, their Government over the past 14 years. They have been built by ordinary people doing extraordinary things: rule breakers, convention breakers and trend defiers who have pioneered thousands of small revolutions in our arts and culture.

I believe that with a genuine partner in Government—one that bulldozes barriers, that creates stability and certainty for businesses and international investors, that collaborates with businesses and artists as equal partners to turbocharge growth, that does not try to persuade every ballerina in the country to retrain, and that ensures that creative

education is at the heart of all our education in schools and that every single child in this country does not go through their education without a proper creative education—we can create even greater British success stories.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I observe no Paddington stare. The point is well made about young people starting off and growing into the creative industries. The pantomimes and local amateur dramatics that I get involved in are the seedcorn of these things by getting kids on stage, but does the Minister agree that if the local newspapers go down—and so many of them are in danger right across the UK—those things will not get the publicity and support that helps to grow the industry?

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman asks four questions in one, which is quite creative of him. He says he is involved with pantomime; some of us on the Labour Benches would say that he has been in pantomime for much of his political career. He makes an important point about journalism, which is a very important creative industry in this country. The Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock), who is sitting beside me, has responsibility for print journalism. She takes ensuring the survival of local journalism very seriously. How on earth could people otherwise hear stories from their local community? There is also a job to do on tackling misinformation. If the only information people ever hear about their local community comes from social media, a lot of it might not be as accurate as we would like.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: I give way to the most irresistible man in the room.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for setting the scene so positively. Does he agree that one of the great benefits of this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland is that all the cultures and regions come together? If I have the chance, later I will talk about Northern Ireland's contribution. We can all gain if we work together.

Chris Bryant: I agree 100%. So many programmes made in Northern Ireland are an intrinsic part of what the UK has to offer. I am not sure whether “Derry Girls” is necessarily the hon. Gentleman's thing, but it is one of the funniest programmes we have seen in many years. “Game of Thrones,” of course, was made in Northern Ireland, and many Northern Irish actors have done extraordinarily well on the British scene, and on a much wider canvas.

I am particularly stimulated by the fact that Albert Finney and Glenda Jackson were born on the same day. Those working-class kids both ended up going to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and having phenomenal acting careers, with Oscars, awards and so on. Where are the Albert Finneys and Glenda Jacksons of the future? Whether they come from Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales or a difficult estate in England—even Stoke-on-Trent—we will have failed so many of our young people if the only schools that provide a real creative education, in art, music or drama, are the Etons of this country, and we will not have the creative industries we need.

Since last July, creative businesses have been nothing but straight with us about what is holding them back, and this Government have heard them loud and clear. They want investment, innovation, international competitiveness and skills. Each one of these has to be a litmus test for what we are doing as a Department and as a Government.

Today, I want to set out some of the challenges, as we see them, and what this Government are doing to address them. Our starting point, right across Government, has been an appreciation of what the creative industries give us. They are not a “nice to have” or a cherry on the cake; they are an essential part of who we are as a country and what we are trying to achieve as a Government.

We are very aware that brands like the BBC and the Premier League are an important part of our soft power around the world, which is one of the reasons why the Foreign Secretary and the Culture Secretary recently launched the Soft Power Council, because we think we can do far more with that.

People sometimes focus on the BBC, which I worked for many moons ago. I remember getting into a taxi in Brussels, and the driver asked me what I did. I said that I worked for the BBC, and he said, “Oh, I love the BBC and all those wonderful TV programmes: ‘Inspector Morse’ and ‘Brideshead Revisited.’” He basically gave me a long list of ITV programmes.

Jamie Stone: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: Again?

Jamie Stone: “The Traitors,” which attracted 7.4 million viewers on the BBC last Friday, was filmed at Ardross castle in my constituency.

Chris Bryant: I was at a tourism conference last Thursday, and our tourism offer is especially good at giving people the opportunity to visit places where films have been made. One of the biggest investors in our country in the past few years has been Tom Cruise, who has another film coming out in the near future. Many film locations are wonderful places for tourist visits. I notice the hon. Gentleman has gone from panto to “The Traitors”—need I say more? Of course, “The Traitors” was originally a Dutch format, but the BBC has made it better than anybody else made it, and has given it new life. I will not spoil it for anyone, but I thought the final episode was very unfair, ending as it did.

From the outset, the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Business and Trade made our creative sector one of eight growth-driving industries at the heart of our industrial strategy. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and I are developing a long-term sector plan, along with Baroness Shriti Vadera and Sir Peter Bazalgette.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I commend the hon. Gentleman on the passionate case he is making for investment in the arts. Does he recognise the work of Darren Henley and Arts Council England? I suspect that we have all received copies of the third edition of Darren Henley’s book, which sets out very clearly the case for public investment in the arts and the multiplier effect that has. In the months running up to the comprehensive spending review, is it not essential that the whole sector comes together to ensure the hon. Gentleman is well equipped to go into battle with Treasury officials?

Chris Bryant: The right hon. Gentleman used to be a Treasury Minister, so perhaps he can give us some tips on how we can secure that funding. I note that since July last year, Conservative MPs have developed a tendency to call for more expenditure and less taxation on things. I gently suggest to him that those two things do not meet together. If he gives me tips on how I can get more money out of the Treasury, I will give him tips on how to talk about demanding more money.

The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point about the sector: some of our biggest creative industries are completely commercially focused, including publishing, architecture, advertising and video games. However, I have tried to make the argument that the sector is a whole ecosystem; we do not get Great British films and a Great British film industry without a Great British theatre industry, and we do not get a Great British commercial theatre industry without having a subsidised theatre industry as well. We need to foster a combination of broadcasters, subsidised performing arts and commercially centred creative industries, and build on that.

The right hon. Gentleman refers to Arts Council England. As he knows, we have initiated a full review of how Arts Council England works, to ensure that the money does what it is intended to do around the whole of England. The review will be led by Baroness Margaret Hodge, who will be doughty—I think that is the best word—and I look forward to seeing what she comes up with.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman talks about the ecosystem, but he has done something that we have not seen for a long time: he has united every creative sector in opposition to his plans to water down copyright. Copyright has underpinned the success of our creative industries and made them global powerhouses. Yesterday, Sir Paul McCartney warned against those plans, and spoke about what could happen to all creative industries. Does the hon. Gentleman take on board what he says, and will he revisit the plans?

Chris Bryant: As I have said to the hon. Gentleman privately, and am happy to say again in public, I do not believe for a single instant that the legislation that we will eventually put to the House will undermine or water down our copyright regime in this country. It has been absolutely essential to the creative industries that they own their intellectual property and can control their right to it, and we will not change that. However, we face a real problem in this country, as do many countries around the world, which is that there is legal uncertainty around—

Pete Wishart *indicated dissent.*

Chris Bryant: There is such legal uncertainty that the matter is being contested in different court cases around the world. This afternoon, I met Getty Images, which has brought one such case. We cannot simply wait for the court cases to resolve the matter for us somehow. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would endorse elements of the consultation—for instance, those around transparency. Let us have that conversation. It is a genuine consultation. Earlier this afternoon, I said to my office that I am very happy for Sir Paul McCartney to come in; we can talk it all through with him.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The Minister talks about the ecosystem and bringing together all the sectors. There is no better example in this country—perhaps in the world—than the Edinburgh international festivals, which bring all the sectors together. Edinburgh is also a heartland of small venues. What will the Government do to help small venues, which have been suffering for five or six years, to cope with the national insurance changes, because they are employers and are being hit by them?

Chris Bryant: The hon. Lady makes a very good point about the Edinburgh festivals; I hope that the Hansard Reporters heard the “s” at the end. Sometimes people just refer to the Edinburgh international festival, but there is a series of festivals, including book and television festivals. That ecosystem has managed to grow and grow; it is precisely the kind of thing that we want to do. Another element of the Edinburgh international festivals is that there is a cluster there. The previous Government rightly identified that where we can create a cluster around a creative industry, we stand a greater chance of building it and enabling greater growth. For instance, Royal Leamington Spa is a cluster for the video games industry, as is Dundee. There are various clusters around the country; that is something that we want to build on.

The hon. Lady asks about small venues. As she may know, we have backed the call made in the previous Parliament by the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage)—I wanted to call her the Secretary of State—for a voluntary levy on tickets for gigs in arenas to provide money for small venues. I am very hopeful about that. I am pushing as hard as I can for the industry to adopt the measure on a voluntary basis, but we have made it very clear that if it does not, we will make it happen on a statutory basis. I hope that we can move forward on that relatively soon. Likewise, many small venues in the hospitality industries thought that there would be a cliff edge at the end of March for the 70% relief on business rates. We have said that the relief will be 40%, and there will be a renewal of and change to business rates in future years. We are trying to help small music venues in all those ways, but in the end, if there is nobody to perform in a small music venue, it is not a small music venue. That is why I return to the effort to ensure that we have creative education in all our schools.

As hon. Members will be aware, there are many creative businesses in this country that have a great idea or product and are ready to expand, but cannot access the finance that they need to take their growth to the next level. Like every part of the UK economy, the creative industries have amazing start-ups that struggle to scale up. As a first step to addressing that all-important finance barrier, the British Business Bank, which supports over £17 billion in finance for business, committed in the last week to increasing the scale of its support for the creative industries. Possibly one of the most important things that we can do over the next couple of years is try to improve access to finance for all our creative businesses, whether at the moment of their inception, at the point of scale-up, or when they are 10 years in. We should back venture capital funds investing in UK creative industries, and support experts who understand the unique strengths of the sector in the UK.

To provide creative businesses across the country with the support that they need to scale up, we have confirmed over £16 million of funding for the Create

Growth programme. In addition, we are backing early-stage games developers with £5.5 million funding for the Dundee-based UK games fund. We want the next generation of hit UK games to be made across the UK.

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): I welcome the measures the Government are bringing in to support our important creative industries. Those businesses also need a talent pipeline, and my constituency has a world-leading arts university and a higher education and further education system supporting film, television and games development. What are the Government doing to support that talent pipeline and our educational institutions?

Chris Bryant: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Indeed, I have often wondered whether we should have a specific programme for her area, because she is right that there is a concentration of courses, universities and businesses devoted to those same industries. I would be happy to meet her, and perhaps if she would like to come into the Department, we could go through some of the specifics about how we will be assisting in her area.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): The Minister makes the good point that creative industries need to be backed with finance that they can access. Will he ensure that grassroots, small-scale projects away from the big cities, such as on the Isle of Wight where my constituency is, receive the finance they need, so we can realise our aim and endeavour of getting a film studio set up?

Chris Bryant: I have heard tell of a film studio in the hon. Member's constituency, so I wondered whether he was going to refer to that. Obviously, the previous Government and this Government have been committed in different ways to ensuring that we expand the provision of film studio space in the country. We are almost up to the level of having more space than Hollywood, and we are keen to progress that. Again, if he wants to come into the Department and talk about the specifics of what we might be able to do in his constituency, I would be happy to do that. He is right that sometimes we have focused on the massive projects, but we cannot get many massive projects in the creative industries without starting with the small and medium-sized businesses, and that is where we need to go.

One thing that has stood in the way of film studios for quite some time is the re-evaluation of business rates. I am glad that we have got to a much more sensible position over the past 12 months on the matter. Likewise, planning applications have been phenomenally difficult in many cases. We were proud to put £25 million into the Crown Works studio in Gateshead, which I look forward to visiting soon.

One of the principal barriers to innovation in 2025 is that not enough investment is going into research and development in the creative industries, and I know the Select Committee has looked at that. It is why the Prime Minister's Council for Science and Technology recommended that

“Public investment in R&D in the creative industries should reflect the size, economic contribution, and future growth potential of the sector.”

That is why we confirmed earlier this month that we will strengthen the investment from our national research funding agency—UK Research and Innovation—into creative research and development.

Another part of the equation is, of course, tax relief. One of the great catalysts for the strong growth of our creative industries has been targeted tax reliefs for different sectors, introduced by both the Conservative Government and this Labour Government. We built on those reliefs in our first 100 days in government, with an enhanced independent film tax credit to support home-grown talent and UK co-productions and an enhanced tax relief for visual effects from the start of this year. That tax relief sends a clear message to our directors, visual effect artists and actors: “Be courageous, take risks and reap the rewards. Your Government are behind you.” I hope to be able to say more on film and high-end television at the Select Committee tomorrow morning—I am sure the Committee has some difficult questions for me.

On skills, education and the workforce, we want to see more good-quality creative jobs and more creative businesses popping up across the country. But too often what I hear from young people is that they could no more dream of getting those jobs than going to the moon. That is not just a tragic waste of human potential; it is bad business. That is why Steven Knight, the creator of “*Peaky Blinders*”, who is working to bring a film school to Birmingham, is recruiting and training 20% of the workforce from local postcodes, and I applaud him. It is essential for investors to know that they do not have to incur the cost of shipping people in to work on a project when that talent exists everywhere, but the opportunity does not.

That is why we made it a core priority in our manifesto to improve access to the arts and music as part of our opportunity mission. We wasted no time in getting that work under way, with the Education Secretary launching an expert-led independent curriculum and assessment review within a month of the general election. On top of that, we provided a further £3 million to expand the creative careers programme, so that we can broaden and diversify the talent pipeline in the creative industries.

Only by restoring culture’s place in the classroom and beyond will we be able to get young people ready for the creative jobs of tomorrow. We set up Skills England to work with employers and to help give us a coherent national picture of where skills gaps exist and how they can be addressed through further qualifications and technical education. In its first report, Skills England highlighted the importance of the creative industries for both current and future opportunity and growth.

We also need to ensure that there are opportunities in the workplace. We know that apprenticeships can be incredible springboards into creative careers, but that relies on there being a levy that works in the interests of employers and apprentices. For years before the general election, I heard repeatedly from the creative industries how difficult it was to use the apprenticeship levy in their industry. If someone is making a film, it might be a six, seven or eight-month project, which was not enough to meet the previous criteria for the apprenticeship levy. That is why I am really proud that we are working with Skills England to transform the apprenticeship levy into a new growth and skills levy, to create opportunities and provide greater flexibility for employers and apprenticeships. We plan to bring forward changes so that shorter apprenticeships are available from August 2025, recognising the particular needs of the creative industries.

A 12-month apprenticeship is no good for employers who need skills for projects that are shorter than that. We are knocking down that needless hurdle.

For sectors such as music, the grassroots is always where it all begins. We are therefore not only continuing to support Arts Council England’s supporting grassroots music fund, but working up a 12-point plan for music—it says 10-point plan here, but when I looked at it this morning, it was already a 12-point plan. The truth of the matter is that music is a vital part of our lives, whether it is classical music, opera, pop music or heavy metal, which some people like—I see the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale), nodding in a heavy metal sort of way; he has to be careful at his age, although I think he is younger than I am. The point is that we all have our different tastes in music, but we know how important it is to people’s enjoyment of life and to their being able to express themselves.

There is also nothing as important as being able to go to a live music event. One thing we are working very hard on—I made a statement about it earlier this year—is trying to make sure that the secondary ticket market, which has behaved in a frankly duplicitous and often parasitical way towards the music industry, is brought to heel and actually operates in the interests of fans.

I also want to talk about exports. We have some remarkable export strengths in the creative industries. Publishing achieved year-on-year growth and is now worth £11.6 billion to our economy, with export income accounting for almost 60% of its revenue. We are the largest book exporter in the world, and we should be proud of it. However, we need more success stories like publishing, and we need to make sure that the problems that publishing is having with exporting books—for instance, to the European Union—are overcome.

If we are to have such success stories, we need to fix some of the issues that the last Government unfortunately failed to address, such as touring. If we want the next generation of Ed Sheerans, Dua Lipas, Adeles and Stormzy to stand any chance of breaking into new markets, they must be able to perform overseas without having to navigate a maze of rules and regulations. That is why we are engaging with the EU and EU member states to find an answer that improves arrangements for touring across the European continent, without seeing a return to free movement.

That equally applies to the art market. Artworks are being brought to the UK to be sold in the UK art market, where they might command the highest price, but they are facing great difficulties entering the country. That is the kind of thing we also need to sort out.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. The Minister is giving a very substantial speech, but he has been on his feet for 30 minutes. Hopefully he will be coming to a conclusion at some point.

Chris Bryant: I am afraid that I inherited this speech, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I will try to shut up as soon as I possibly can. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] I think I have united the House there. That was very unkind—I feel a bit upset now.

It will not have escaped hon. Members that the challenges I have outlined today are all interconnected. As I have said, we cannot have thriving creative businesses

[Chris Bryant]

without creative talent with the right skills. We will not see strong export growth numbers if businesses are unable to access the finance they need to expand. The independent film tax relief will be worth nothing if we do not have a curriculum that values culture and fosters, champions and promotes creativity. That is why we are focused on the whole creative ecosystem—from the first spark of inspiration in the classroom, through the first leap into the unknown at a theatre or grassroots music venue, to getting the first foot on the ladder to take a local business national or a national business global. This Government recognise that it all matters, and through the partnership I have spoken about today, we hope to make sure that growth in those industries continues for many decades to come.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Minister.

5.25 pm

Stuart Andrew (Daventry) (Con): It really is a pleasure to speak in today's debate. Right at the outset, I apologise that I will not be here for the closing of the debate, because I have to travel back to Leeds for a funeral tomorrow.

As the Minister said, our creative industries are world leading. With limitless creativity, imagination and entrepreneurial spirit, our creative industries are fundamental to the UK economy, and the contribution they make has often been underappreciated. These industries generate £124 billion a year and employ over 2.4 million people in every corner of the country, and as we have heard, growing the economy means growing our creative industries—even if there was a desperate attempt by the Minister to boost his book sales during his speech.

The importance of the creative industries goes beyond the economy. They provide the news that informs our democracy, the events that showcase our talent and the films that we all love. The imagination of our designers, writers, artists and creators is world leading and brings joy, inspiration and opportunity to our lives. It is testament to the UK being a world leader in many things, events included, given the phenomenal success of events such as the Olympics and other sporting events, the coronation and, of course, the Eurovision song contest. A moment ago, my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen) mentioned Darren Henley's book. He actually mentions me in that book as the first and only Minister for the Eurovision song contest. It was probably the only position I have held in government that my partner was actually interested in.

Chris Bryant: Did we win?

Stuart Andrew: No.

For all the reasons I have mentioned, we as Conservatives backed our creative industries in government. Our record on supporting the creative industries speaks for itself: between 2010 and 2022, those industries grew at more than twice the rate of UK gross value added, expanding by more than 50%. More than 1 million new jobs were created in the sector during that period. During the pandemic, we introduced unprecedented support for the creative industries, including the £1.57 billion culture recovery fund, the £500 million film and TV production

restart scheme, and the £800 million live events reinsurance scheme. That support protected over 5,000 organisations and supported 220,000 jobs, ensuring that our creative industries have been able to bounce back.

Our commitment to support the creative industries also extended to significant tax reliefs. We introduced over £1 billion of tax reliefs for the creative industries, including support for filmmakers through the UK independent film tax credit and business rates relief for theatres and cultural venues. This investment complemented our creative industries sector deal, which put £350 million of public and private investment into the sector. A key example is the £37 million and the new devolved powers to the North East mayoral combined authority to create a film and TV powerhouse up in the north-east, which will enable £450 million of private investment to build the new Crown Works studio. This is an important measure as we seek to spread the opportunities for the creative industries right across the United Kingdom.

We published a sector vision setting out our ambition to grow the creative industries by £50 billion and to create 1 million extra jobs in the creative sectors. This sector vision set out not warm words or platitudes, but a real plan backed by real investment. Our plan included a £28 million investment in the Create Growth programme to support high-growth creative businesses across the UK; an additional £50 million for the second wave of the creative industries clusters programme, building on the £56 million announced in 2018; and £3.2 million for the music export growth scheme to enable emerging artists to break into new international markets. It was a real plan backed by real investment to grow our creative industries by £50 billion.

Personally, I do not doubt any of the Ministers' personal ambitions for the creative sectors. Where the Government are ambitious, we will always seek to be a constructive Opposition, because the potential to grow is huge and the UK has such a great reputation. Equally, we will do our job by highlighting the impact when choices made by the Government pose a significant risk to the sector, because that is the right thing to do.

In opposition, Labour Members promised to “fire up the engines of our creative economy”, and said that they would make the creative industries “central to a decade of national renewal”.

That was a great ambition, which makes it even more confusing that Labour failed to support every single tax relief the Conservatives introduced for these industries after 2010. I am afraid to say that the reality so far is that significant harm is being done by the Government. In the Chancellor's Budget of broken promises, Labour drove the tax burden up to its highest level, surpassing the amount after the second world war. Far from firing up the economy, they have extinguished growth by introducing a national insurance jobs tax that will cost employers in DCMS sectors £2.8 billion.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am enjoying the right hon. Gentleman's speech, but while he is talking about the last Government's record, could he tell me how their plan to defund dozens of creative BTecs and their denigration of creative subjects as Mickey Mouse degrees gives people seeking to study those subjects any confidence that they can go into the pipeline of talent he has talked about?

Stuart Andrew: I think we have absolutely shown our commitment, as I have just illustrated, to the creative industries and to wanting to grow them. Equally, we want to make sure that the courses people are doing equip them well for the opportunities of the future, and I do not see that there is anything wrong in always raising such questions.

Chris Bryant: The shadow Minister said that we—Labour Members in opposition—voted against every single tax relief for the creative industries, but he knows perfectly well that we supported every single one of them and that we originally initiated them. Can I just suggest that we stop this silliness? I am guessing that at some point Conservative Members will vote against the Third Reading of the Finance Bill, which will have a tax relief in it, and if that means that we start saying that they vote against every tax relief, it will be a nonsense. It would be better if we all just grew up, and started saying that we all support tax reliefs for the creative industries.

Stuart Andrew: Given that the Minister has just been going on about 14 years of the last Conservative Government, I find that a bit hypocritical, but that does not surprise me.

The Government have also slashed retail, hospitality and leisure relief, and set out plans to burden businesses with more than 70 radical 1970s-style regulations, imposing £4.5 billion of additional costs on business. I am worried that there seems to have been a failure to protect the creative industries from the Chancellor's growth-killing Budget, just as the Department failed to protect them from the Deputy Prime Minister's radical Employment Rights Bill.

I welcome the £60 million support package, but will it touch the sides when measured against the impact of the Budget? Do not take it from me—take it from Arts Council England, which warned that the Government's national insurance jobs tax will have

“significant implications for cultural organisations.”

Take it from the Music Venue Trust, which has warned that changes to retail, hospitality and leisure relief will put more than 350 grassroots music venues at

“imminent risk of closure, representing the potential loss of more than 12,000 jobs, over £250 million in economic activity and the loss of over 75,000 live music events.”

Pete Wishart: I am sure that, like me, the right hon. Gentleman has received a whole series of briefs from sectors across the creative industries. Their main concern is the possibility of a copyright exception and the watering down of our copyright regime. That is the thing that unites them in anger against this Government, yet the Minister did not even think to mention it in his half an hour or so of peroration. What is the Conservative party's view on that issue, and will it work with us to try to oppose it?

Stuart Andrew: From the meetings I have had with the sector, I can say that the hon. Gentleman is right that that is one of the main issues that people are concerned about, but equally, they are very worried about the impact that national insurance contributions will have on them. I recognise that these are difficult and challenging issues, and we obviously want to work as constructively as we can on them, but we will hold the Government to account.

It is not just me that is saying all this. Take it from the chief executive of the Curve theatre, who warned that the Employment Rights Bill will have a financial knock-on for all theatres. The changes to business property relief will have a significant impact on historic houses—the settings for many iconic dramas and films such as “Downton Abbey”. The impact of those changes is significant.

I regret to say that the bad news for our creative industries does not end there, because unfortunately it is clear that Labour does not have a plan. It scrapped the Conservative Government's review of Arts Council England, then launched a new review starting from square one. It spent more than five months in government before making any announcements on AI and the creative industries, quietly sneaking out a consultation eight days before Christmas, hoping no one would notice. To top it all off, they published a press release boasting about confirming the Conservative Government's independent film tax credit.

As I said, I will work constructively with the Government, but they must take their fingers out of their ears and recognise that the choices they have made are potentially crushing our world-leading creative industries from being even greater successes. We want to build on the great success by people who over the years have done so much to build up the amazing creative industries we have in this country. Our creative industries are world leading, but they need stability and certainty to survive. There are lots of opportunities, but also a host of challenges, including the Budget implications, AI and copyright. We stand to work constructively with the Government where they seek to be ambitious, but equally, when we hear concerns, as we have over and over again in our meetings with the sector, we will push and challenge.

In conclusion, the UK can be proud of our amazing creative industries. Whether it is our fashion designers, film, TV, radio, photography, museums, galleries, libraries, music or performing arts, they offer real opportunities to this country's economy and are something that we can be proud of. Yes, they provide a great deal of soft power, but if we are not careful, we are in danger of damaging them beyond belief. I ask the Department to press the Treasury to think again about the impact of the Budget choices that it made on the sector.

5.39 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): As well as a rich industrial and political heritage, Newport has a vibrant community of creatives and creative industries, so it is good to have the opportunity to highlight them in Government time and, later on, to shamelessly plug some of the local bands that I like.

Creative businesses in Newport generate a not insignificant turnover of around £400 million annually. Those 555 businesses employ more than 5,000 people locally, and that does not even account for the number of talented freelancers. Many of these enterprises are microbusinesses—small but mighty, much like Newport—and together they form the lifeblood of our grassroots arts and culture scene and give future performers the space and opportunity to develop.

Newport is home to an extraordinary wealth of talent, from theatre practitioners and visual artists to community connectors—people who dedicate themselves to bringing

[Jessica Morden]

arts and culture to life in our city. We have local champions such as John Hallam from Maindee Unlimited, Loren Henry of Urban Circle, George Harris of Tin Shed Theatre, and Juls Benson of Reality Theatre, among many others. For years, they have worked to ensure that access to the creative industries in Newport is inclusive. An example of that is the brilliant Operasonic, which is supporting a band formed by the city's Roma community called Newport Boys.

It is not just about live performance. Thanks to our striking industrial and natural landscapes, and our distinctive architecture, Newport has become a veritable filming hotspot in the UK. For more than two decades, it has been a familiar backdrop for "Doctor Who", and Newport was recently showcased in the new S4C series "Ar y Ffin". Newport is prominently featured in ITV's "Out There" and Netflix's "Sex Education". Supporting those productions are state-of-the-art studios such as Urban Myth and Studio Arth, both located in my constituency, where global streaming projects are being created all the time. The Minister mentioned the talent pipeline, and much work is being done to develop and find the many skills we need locally in this industry.

Any contribution about Newport's creative industries would not be complete without celebrating our music scene, which has seen a remarkable renaissance. That fact was recently recognised by the *NME*. I was delighted to join Sam Dabb and the team at Le Pub to celebrate the building's purchase, with help from the UK Government, by Music Venue Properties. That was set up by the Music Venue Trust, which launched its annual report here last week. For more than three decades, Le Pub has stood as the cornerstone of Newport's music culture, and it is great that it has been safeguarded for future generations as a space to grow new bands. Bands that have emerged from Le Pub recently include the brilliant Bug Club, hailing from Monmouthshire, alongside Newport's own Murder Club, The Rogues, Joe Kelly & the Royal Pharmacy, Failstate, Jack Perrett and many others. There is also a new generation of artists, such as a new band called Hairdye, who are getting much attention. Newport is fortunate to have many other grassroots venues, including McCann's, The Cab and the volunteer-led Corn Exchange, all of which will be part of the upcoming Newport music trail, a free two-day festival in the city centre in March.

Newport is, indeed, a cultural powerhouse, but to ensure that it continues to thrive, we must ensure that this cultural renaissance in our city is not just celebrated, but supported. I am therefore pleased that the Government, along with the Welsh Government and Newport city council, recognise the importance of the creative industries as a driver of economic growth and social wellbeing. In the draft budget this year, the Welsh Government are committed to supporting the hospitality sector with 40% non-domestic rates relief. That builds on the £1 billion of support allocated to retail, hospitality and leisure rates relief schemes since 2020. We also should not forget the additional 25% rates relief that Newport council offers to help eligible small venues and businesses.

Increased funding opportunities to support grassroots organisations and venues will only help them flourish further. The £1 ticket levy for arena and big gig events to support small music venues will have a big impact,

and I welcome the Minister's commitment to making that mandatory if the live events industry does not do it voluntarily. Working to tear down the barriers to touring will also be crucial for the continued success not just of British performers and their art, but of our talented sound engineers and the haulage industry. An update on that work was much welcome.

With the right investment and a Government who truly understand the untapped potential of our world-leading creative industries, we can continue to build on that success and secure Newport's creative legacy for generations to come. I look forward to welcoming the Minister to Newport whenever he can come.

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

5.45 pm

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): The Minister referred to his greatest creative output, which apparently is hitting bookshelves soon. I am afraid I cannot match that—a Jaffa Cake haiku, which was cruelly overlooked by the McVitie's marketing department, and a local news story about gnomes being banned from the graveyard in Wrington in north Somerset are as good as I can muster.

The creative industries are the lifeblood of our nation's cultural wellbeing, and we neglect them at our peril. We must never ignore the voices of creators themselves. This weekend, many of us will have been disturbed to see the interview given by Paul McCartney about the challenge that AI poses to the creative industries and to creators.

The Government are correct to pursue artificial intelligence as a route to solving problems in our public services, boosting economic growth and creating new jobs. Nobody would argue with suggestions for speeding up and improving NHS treatment, removing pointless interactions with local councils or smoothing out bureaucracy for businesses in their interactions with Government Departments. In the creative arts, however, we have a very different challenge, and the Government must not put at risk the value of human creativity.

I will make no luddite arguments in this House—as the MP for the constituency that is home to the most influential cyber-cluster outside London, that would be daft. I am pro-business and pro-technology, as are the Liberal Democrats. I regard myself as a techno-optimist. Innovation is not just desirable but necessary. However, it is not an absolute, particularly when we are discussing threats to human creativity. I know that because my constituency is home not just to a cyber-cluster, but to a creative powerhouse. Cheltenham festivals bring visitors from around the world.

Because we are a creative powerhouse, I receive plenty of communication from creatives in Cheltenham. Robin, a composer, told me that he could no longer advise young creatives to rely on a job in the industry, because it simply will not pay. He told me that things will get worse if the changes to copyright go through. Let us consider for a moment the ability of the human mind to compose a tear-jerking piece of music, or of the delicate human hand to paint an evocative landscape or write prose to persuade, inspire, or move the reader. That is

innately human. Such creative endeavour can and does change the world. It brings us growth, and so much more besides.

There is no doubt that technology has an important and positive role to play in this process, and it is already doing so. Technology and creative content must work side by side, but if original human creators are not compensated by default, we risk a future not of glorious, creative technicolour but of many shades of pale grey. Some have already warned that we risk a future of infinite pale grey, in which there is no incentive for humans to initiate any creative process whatsoever. It would be a dereliction of duty by Members of this House if they failed to engage with that risk as part of this discussion and the ongoing discussion about AI.

Last week, along with other MPs, some of whom are in the Chamber this evening, I joined a meeting with a tech company and one of its social media creators. I will not name the company or the creator; that would not be fair and would not add much to the debate. We were told of the huge growth potential for creators that the online and social media world presented. We were told that creators are employing teams of people to produce their content—a big jobs boost. During the discussion, they were asked what happens to jobs growth when a creator's work is crawled by AI to the extent that it is reproduced hundreds, thousands or even an infinite number of times. If an answer came, however, it was not comprehensive or persuasive.

The mood music suggests that the Government and big tech firms favour an opt-out approach for creators, placing burdens on individual musicians, artists and writers to protect their work. I asked an expert about the potential risks of an opt-out approach and received an illuminating answer. The expert told me:

“For human creators, an opt-in model generally offers stronger protection.”

The first reason for that was control, as

“creators retain explicit control over how their work is used by AI”.

The second was compensation, as

“An opt-in system could be linked to licensing agreements, allowing creators to receive compensation for the use of their work in AI training”.

Pete Wishart: I am listening very carefully to the hon. Gentleman, and he is spot on about some of the dangers and threats posed to the sector by generative AI. Does he agree that there is a way to do this that could benefit and serve both AI and the creative industries, but that it will not involve a clearly unworkable opt-out approach? Indeed, it has never been explained how exactly that would work. Will he encourage other colleagues to look at working together to ensure we get a solution for both sectors?

Max Wilkinson: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right. I agree that the concepts of opt-out and opt-in need to be pursued at greater length.

Thirdly, the expert told me that the preservation of value offered stronger protection:

“By requiring explicit permission, an opt-in model helps maintain the value of original creative works.”

The expert did point out two drawbacks. First, an opt-in approach has potential drawbacks in the form of an extra administrative burden on creators. Interestingly,

this expert's second listed drawback was that an opt-in model would place limits on AI's ability to gather data for training and development, which does not seem to me like much of a drawback for creators.

I asked that very same expert what would happen if creators lost their intellectual property rights to AI. The expert told me there was a risk of

“a loss of income and motivation, a devaluation of creative work, ethical concerns, legal uncertainty”

and, intriguingly, “domination by AI operators.” I use the word “intriguingly” because this expert seems aware of its own power—the expert was Google Gemini.

At this stage, those considerations are unknowns, and there is much uncertainty. Google Gemini is pulling information produced mostly thanks to human endeavour and discussion sourced from across the internet, but the fact that this view is being presented by AI itself surely suggests there is cause for some concern. Our role as parliamentarians must be to protect the interests of humans, not big tech companies; to scrutinise the proposals of big tech companies; to avoid the luddite tendency, crucially; and to build in suitable safeguards.

Chris Bryant: As the Minister, I do not want to intervene too much. I sympathise with a great deal of what the hon. Gentleman has said. One of my concerns, however, is that if this country legislates in a particular direction, in order to reinforce copyright in the way that several hon. Members have suggested, the danger is that companies would simply train overseas, using the UK's creative talent and intellectual property without any form of remuneration whatsoever. That is why I think it is really important that we get to a place where we have both sides working together.

Max Wilkinson: Of course. The Minister will not be surprised to hear that I will be moving on to that in a moment.

If, against the will of the creative industry, the Government are to proceed with an opt-out approach—I hope they do not—it seems logical that such an approach must come with strong safeguards, which may come in the form of automatic attribution, in order to identify the creative inspiration for any work that has been crawled and reproduced. However, more importantly, we need suitable levels of compensation to be automatically awarded. In short, if the big tech companies want default access to our creators' work, they must expect the default to be that they pay for it. Tech firms will argue that an opt-in approach, or one that places the burden on them, would place us out of step with other nations, and I accept that that might be the case. However, let us look at it from another perspective. Is the suggestion that we might give our creative industry more respect really such a terrible idea? I do not think so. Given the widespread threat to the UK's creative industries from this and other economic circumstances, I would suggest not.

Having touched on AI, I will now address a few other subjects more briefly. First, I turn to the unfashionable topic of Brexit. The previous Conservative Government's disastrous Brexit deal excluded artistic provisions, and the effect of that is reflected in a shocking statistic: between 2017 and 2023, we suffered a 23% drop in the number of British artists touring the EU. The Liberal Democrats backed free and simple short-term travel arrangements for UK artists to perform in the European Union.

[Max Wilkinson]

Secondly, I turn to education. It is well known that changes to policy in the past decade or so have diminished arts education in state schools, with more than 40% of schools now no longer entering students for GCSE music or drama, and almost 90% not offering GCSE dance. Universities are also scaling back their arts offerings. The Liberal Democrats would restore arts subjects to the core of the curriculum, ensuring that every child has the opportunity to study music, dance, drama and the visual arts.

Finally, I turn to local government. Local councils are historically the single biggest funders of culture in their areas, but their spending powers have been much reduced. There is a risk that as part of the devolution process, and as local government reorganisation happens, additional pressure will be placed on social care and children's services. Although those things need attention, we must not allow the arts to be forced further to the fringes of public spending debates.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): On the funding of local arts and theatres, my constituency has a wonderful local theatre called The Capitol, which is owned and managed by the district council. However, our council is likely to be merged with some debt-laden neighbouring councils, with some of the responsibilities my hon. Friend has outlined, and that poses a severe threat to the theatre's long-term survival. Does he agree that the Government need to look at inventive ways to reverse the decline in local funding? One option would be to emulate France's patronage law, which provides for 60% tax relief on donations to art organisations.

Max Wilkinson: That sounds like a good idea. I think there are some really logical ways we could do this by ringfencing some assets for local value—attaching them to car parks, which are already producing revenue in local areas. There are creative ways that different local areas could do that. However, it is a concern, and I do not think that discussion on this matter has been had as part of the discussion on devolution and local government reorganisation.

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): I want to go back slightly to the point about health and social care spend by local authorities. Is there a good argument to be made that as more and more people require social care and support, particularly in care homes, there may be advantages in investing in the arts and culture in order to take them to people who would otherwise find them difficult to access?

Max Wilkinson: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Older people in care homes can benefit from such creative outlets—both from having people bring arts and culture to them, and from days out at our local cultural institutions.

As some of the challenges we face are global, I will finish with a look at how other Governments are supporting their creative sectors. Since 2010, Germany, France and Finland have all increased their budgets. In the same period, the UK reduced its budget for arts and culture provision by 6%. More recently, Governments of EU nations and others around the world have begun spending more on their creative sectors, with the cultural centres

of China, Russia, Portugal, France and Spain all increasing their budgets. This year, we cut the British Council budget by £12 million.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): The British Council may have to sell half of its art in order to pay back a £200 million debt from covid. Surely it is an example of knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing if we cannot reschedule that debt to enable the British Council to retain its valuable pieces of art, 4,500 pieces of which are under threat.

Max Wilkinson: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. That does sound like a potentially devastating blow to our nation.

Britain has gifted the world the likes of Charles Dickens's literature, the music of The Beatles and the best film of all time, "Paddington 2". By amending our education system, protecting cultural spend locally, securing a fairer deal with the EU and protecting creatives from exploitation by AI, we can properly support our creative industry and ensure we continue to make a similar contribution for many years to come.

5.58 pm

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in this important debate. I want to focus on three areas: our potential in Norwich, education and supporting freelancers. The creative industries are something that I am passionate about. I grew up in Norfolk, and for much of my childhood my mother ran the local arts centre in King's Lynn. Particularly in rural areas, we sometimes forget the value of arts and culture. As a councillor in Southwark, I held the culture portfolio, and I saw at first hand the many systemic challenges facing our creative industry.

I want to pause briefly on the rosy picture painted by the right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew). As the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) just alluded to, local government faced huge cuts under the Conservative Government, and we saw a reduction in council spending on arts and culture. I think it is important to recognise the huge impact that austerity has had on our creative industries.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I am sure the hon. Lady would also recognise that there will be sites in her constituency and beyond that were saved during the pandemic by the actions of the then Government. Some £1.57 billion in the culture recovery fund protected cultural venues up and down the country from what was potentially an existential crisis.

Alice Macdonald: I recognise that point, but as a culture portfolio holder I saw that we increasingly had to bid for small pots of money, without overall systemic funding. We were able to keep all our libraries open, but many local authorities were forced to make difficult decisions. I recognise that there were some decisions during covid, but they were against a backdrop of long-term cuts to our cultural sector which we also need to recognise.

Let me move on to some of the brilliant places I have in my constituency and in Norfolk. Data from the Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre shows that clusters of creative businesses support positive

economic, social and cultural change across the UK, not just in major cities. My own city of Norwich has been identified as an emerging creative cluster. It is a world-class UNESCO city of literature, home to the National Centre for Writing and the wonderful creative writing course at the University of East Anglia, which counts Ian McEwan, Rose Tremain and, more recently, Emma Healey, as graduates. Norwich was even the first city to adopt the Public Libraries 1850 Act. Today, it is home to the wonderful Millennium library—it is also a library of sanctuary, which is very important at the moment—and the Sainsbury Centre for visual arts. I particularly want to highlight the “pay what you can” model it has just introduced to ensure that culture is accessible to all. Before Christmas, I saw the world premiere of Carlos Acosta’s “Nutmacker in Havana” in Norwich, which has now come to London. As well as investing in opportunities outside London, we can also learn a lot from what we see in those areas.

On skills, we have a great ecosystem in Norwich. We have: the University of East Anglia, which I mentioned; the Norwich University of the Arts, supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council to invest in a new immersive screen facility in Mile Cross in my constituency, which will help to create good quality jobs for the future; and City College Norwich, with cutting-edge digital teaching facilities. We are also home to many entrepreneurs and start-ups. I really welcome what the Minister said about ensuring access to finance. I visited Akcela, a start-up incubator, which highlighted that that is one of the biggest barriers to SMEs in our area.

We have a huge amount of potential in Norwich, a lot of which is not known about. In my role as one of the Members of Parliament for that city, I want Norwich to be recognised for what it is: a centre of innovation and creativity, as well as a very historic and beautiful city to visit. We have a huge amount to be proud of, but we need joined-up action at all levels to unlock it. As I have heard from many in the sector, we need stability and certainty, which I know the Government are determined to bring.

I want to ask the Minister about a few specific areas. I welcome the £40 million funding he referenced for the Create Growth programme, the UK Games Fund and the UK Global Screen Fund. It would be good to understand how businesses in my area can benefit from that funding. The UK Research and Innovation’s creative clusters programme, delivered via the Arts and Humanities Research Council, has been shown to boost regional economic growth. Norwich has yet to benefit from creative cluster investment. Will the Minister update us on that programme, so that more regions can benefit?

We have touched on devolution, which is a big topic of conversation in Norfolk right now, as it is in many areas across the country. I welcome the ambition to give local areas more control over growth and skills, which is a big barrier in this area. Can the Minister also assure me that the creative industries will play a key part in devolution and that for areas such as Norfolk, where we do not yet have a devolution deal or a mayoral combined authority, we will not lose out on investment while that goes through its journey? I welcome the recently published Norfolk growth strategy from our county council and the local business board, which lays out a pathway to how we can maximise the creative industries.

Let me turn now to education. We have seen, and data shows, that there has been a decline in people studying creative subjects at further education and higher education level. We saw the value of creative education talked down under the previous Government, even though we know it is important to invest in it as well as subjects such as science. I hope the Government’s curriculum review will restore creative education to the heart of our schools and ensure that all pupils can benefit from studying music, theatre, creative writing and more. If creative education is not central to the school curriculum, we know it becomes the domain of the wealthy and more privileged. We must open up opportunity to all children irrespective of their background or which school they go to.

When I was a child, I was able—as I am sure many Members were—to benefit from free music lessons. Although the cello does not get much of an outing any more, I note the importance of music lessons in school. Too often, music provision is not stable across the country and can be insufficient. Will the Government commit to improving and expanding music teaching in schools, and ensure that the workforce is valued and treated with respect? I also want to make a point raised by one of my constituents regarding the need for young people with special educational needs and disabilities to get extra support, in particular the need for people with autism to get into arts and the broader creative sector.

Finally, a note on freelancers. As I mentioned, I was the cabinet member for culture as we came out of the pandemic. I heard from many freelancers about the very difficult impact the covid pandemic had on them, and a feeling that too often, and not just in that period, their voice is not heard in the sector. Freelancers comprise a large proportion—about 28%—of the creative sector workforce. Freelancing comes with many benefits such as flexibility, but many risks too, such as low pay and a lack of entitlement to a range of workplace rights. I hope the Minister, in his closing remarks, will update us on support for freelancers, including any conversations with the Department for Business and Trade pertaining to the Employment Rights Bill.

There are many areas that could be discussed in this debate and I have touched on a few of them. We have discussed AI at length, but my constituents have also raised with me the importance of getting the balance right in that area. Overall, it is clear that the Government recognise the benefit of the creative sectors and will invest in them. I think the Minister will be invited to every single place in the country, but I hope he might come to the east of England to see how much there is to offer. I look forward to working with him and his team to maximise that benefit.

6.6 pm

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I am delighted to have the opportunity to talk about our world-leading creative industries. I listened very carefully to everything the Minister said, and there was a lot of it. I love his undoubted passion for these sectors, and I love the understanding he has for them and the really strong rhetoric he puts into his support for them. I just hope and pray that it is contagious, and that he has the energy to ensure that it delivers a real, meaningful and robust commitment from the Government that turns into action on behalf of these sectors.

[*Dame Caroline Dinenage*]

There is so much we can be proud of. In the past couple of weeks we have seen Oscar nominations for Felicity Jones, Cynthia Erivo, Ralph Fiennes and everyone's favourite, "Wallace and Gromit". I am sure the Minister was not impervious to the brat summer that we all went through last year, reflected in Charli XCX's five Brit award nominations. This year, we will have the inaugural South by Southwest London event and the World Design Congress, which will be taking place here for the first time in more than 50 years.

Our creative industries are remarkable and they have an immense soft power value. I welcome the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office working together to increase the UK's influence abroad. As ever, the Culture, Media and Sport Committee is a trailblazer, working with the Foreign Affairs Committee and the International Development Committee last year to look at the BBC World Service and its future. Ministers can expect to see the results very soon.

The launch of the Soft Power Council, as a collaboration between DCMS and the FCDO, has been welcomed by the creative industries. I say welcomed, but I should say tentatively welcomed. Alongside warm words, the sector also needs to see the Government walk the walk if they are really to harness the global super power of our creative industries, whether by cutting red tape, establishing bilateral cultural agreements that enable our creatives to tour the world, or looking at how we pitch Government intervention to ensure the world continues to invest here. With that in mind, I am concerned that the breadth of the creative industries is under-represented on the council. Fashion, design, video games and, apart from music, most of the performing arts are missing, despite their immense popularity and international influence. I wonder whether the Minister could look at that.

Chris Bryant: It might be easier to answer that immediately. I have been very keen to try to make the council a bit smaller, but it will have lots of separate working groups that will include all the creative industries the hon. Lady talked about. In the end it is about deliverables—it is not just about having another talking shop—and that is what I am very keen to deliver.

Dame Caroline Dinenage: We may be here for a long time if the Minister answers every question that I am going to ask over the next few minutes, but let us have a go.

We in the Select Committee are very excited, because tomorrow the Minister will be appearing before us for the final episode of a very long-running inquiry into film and high-end television. I do not want to give away too much—no spoilers, Madam Deputy Speaker—but I would like to share with the House evidence that we received recently. Everyone will have had a different TV highlight over Christmas, but two massive hits were undoubtedly "The Mirror and the Light" on the BBC and "Black Doves" on Netflix. Peter Kosminsky, the director of "The Mirror and the Light", told us that every streamer turned down the option to take up the show, despite the awards, the critical success and the acclaim for that first series of "Wolf Hall". In fact, the only possible way to make it was for the producer, the writer,

the director and the leading star to give up a significant proportion of their fees. It is unimaginable—is it not?—but it is not unique.

The Producers Alliance for Cinema and Television, charmingly known as PACT, has warned that 15 green-lit dramas are stuck unmade because the financial contribution that a public service broadcaster can offer, together with sales advance and UK tax breaks, simply is not enough to compete with the current inflated cost environment. Jane Featherstone, the producer of "Black Doves" and other massive hits such as "Broadchurch" and "Chernobyl", told our Committee that the PSBs were being "priced out" of making high-end drama, which means that British stories for British audiences are at risk, as are the training grounds for the next generation of talent. We talk so much about the importance of creative education, but if we do not have the jobs for those young people to come into when they leave school, we are selling the next generation a dream. I know that the Minister and the Secretary of State value the telling of British stories, so the Minister can expect us to press him on that tomorrow.

When it comes to British stories from across our isles, we cannot overlook the value of our PSBs and the challenges that they face owing to competition from international streamers and changing audience behaviour. The uniquely British flavour of PSB productions such as "Fleabag", "Derry Girls" and "Peaky Blinders" makes them some of our most popular and enduring exports, but it is no exaggeration to say that they are facing an existential challenge. Over the coming months we will hear from the leadership of the BBC, Channel 4 and Ofcom about the BBC charter review, the implementation of the Media Act 2024, and the wider challenges that they face. We will also want to discuss advertising with them and with other broadcasters. The shift from broadcast to online advertising is not new, but we must ensure that broadcasters are not left disadvantaged by outdated competition rules.

I want to make sure that the creative industries are delivering for their employers and contractors. CIISA, the Creative Industries Independent Standards Authority, under the brilliant stewardship of Jen Smith and Baroness Kennedy, is at a critical point as it concludes its consultation on standards today. It concerns me that while some parts of the creative industries make positive noises about CIISA, in reality they do not lean in, and other organisations—especially those with headquarters abroad—are reluctant to engage at all. I know that the Minister cares about this, but if we are to recruit and, critically, retain talented people, there must be no hiding place for bad behaviour.

I am delighted by the Minister's commitment to our grassroots music venues levy, and for the signal that he will be willing to act if a voluntary solution is not working out. The establishment of the LIVE Trust is a step in the right direction, and I hope that more will be done to include artists and independent promoters in the conversations about where the money will go and how it is distributed. May I ask the Minister to give us an update in his closing speech?

Let me continue my whistlestop tour of the creative industries and the performing arts. Last week, the National Theatre launched its "Scene Change" report, which highlights the willingness of the performing arts to innovate in their business models. I am sure that the Minister will look carefully at its recommendations, but I want to

pull out two key points. First, as he said, our creative industries generate more for our economy than aerospace, oil and gas and renewables combined, and they need a robust industrial strategy to match their firepower. Without investment, there is no innovation. The National Theatre, for example, is as much a totemic British export as BAE or Rolls-Royce. “National Theatre at Home” has brought productions to new audiences across the United Kingdom and, indeed, the world. However, few in the sector have the funds for such projects, and I hope that the Minister will consider the report’s recommendation of an innovation fund, which could drive growth. Secondly, UK Research and Innovation, which the Minister also mentioned, exists to foster research and innovation, yet the creative arts are wildly under-represented, given their gross value added.

I know that the Minister enjoys a bit of theatrics, so while I was at the National Theatre, I wondered which of its productions reflected him best. There is “The Importance of Being Earnest”; one review of the current production noted

“just the right amount of delightful mischief.”

There is “Nye”, the story of a hugely influential Welsh politician taking policies through against enormous opposition. But then I realised that we needed to go back a bit further, to the smash hit “One Man, Two Guvnors”, because the Minister finds himself working for both the Science Secretary and the Culture Secretary. Our story begins as he tries to justify the Government’s proposals on artificial intelligence and copyright.

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology has claimed that I do not understand the idea of consultations, and the Minister has claimed that I do not understand the detail of this consultation. I am beginning to feel a bit gaslit by it all, but I know that the Science Secretary is not saying the same thing to the creative industries, because I am told that he is refusing to meet them at all. I wonder whether the Minister is telling the creative industries that they do not understand the detail—because everyone I have spoken to in the sector seems to understand the detail perfectly, and they do not like it.

This is not about pitting the creative industries against AI. This is not a luddite sector; the creative industries use AI to great effect, and are always at the forefront of embracing innovation. The Minister said so himself: he said that they never abide by the straitjacket of conformity. The aim is a system that is transparent, as he said, but with licensing arrangements that protect intellectual property. The Government’s consultation paper says there is a “lack of clarity” in the regime, but the people I speak to tell me that the situation is perfectly clear, and that the large AI developers cannot legally use it to their advantage. Instead, the Government’s proposals move the onus on to creators to protect their work, rather than AI developers having to seek permission to use it. This is known as the opt-out. We have the opt-in, the opt-out, the opt-in, the opt-out—it is the legislative equivalent of the hokey-cokey.

The fact that unscrupulous developers are not seeking permission from rights holders does not mean that we should bend the system in their favour. Our world-leading creative industries have made it clear that the European Union’s opt-out model, which the Government’s consultation favours, does not work. They say that there is no existing technical protection measure that

allows rights holders to easily protect their content from scraping, and web bots take advantage of that unworkable system to copy protected works, bypassing inadequate technology and the unclear copyright exception. Put simply, the EU opt-out system creates an even greyer area.

I know the Minister does not agree with me on that, but may I ask him to agree with me on just two points? First, if the Government are determined to go down the opt-out route, any opt-out must be tightly defined and enforced, so that developers cannot wilfully disapply it or plead ignorance. Secondly, any technical solution that protects rights must be adequately future-proofed, so that creators and developers do not simply end up in an arms race to find new ways to stop those who are hoovering up copyrighted works.

May I also ask the Minister to address two questions? I have always said that AI should provide the solution to AI, and that is what we all hope will happen, but what if a suitable technical solution that protects rights is not found? Do we stick to the status quo, and keep the onus on AI developers to follow the law? It is notable that the creative industries are not represented on the Science and Technology Cabinet Committee. Can the Minister confirm that they will have a voice when the final decisions are made? If they are not, as he says, to be the cherry on the cake, they will need that seat at the table.

I do not want to end my speech on a pessimistic note. There is much to be optimistic about for our creative industries; they are the envy of the world on virtually every front. The Minister loves a song quotation, and it is almost as if the top three songs of all time, according to *Rolling Stone* magazine, could provide the backdrop for him and his role right now. Do you know what they are, Madam Deputy Speaker? “A Change is Gonna Come”, but the Minister needs to “Fight the Power” and give our creative industries what they deserve: “Respect”.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Follow that, Jo Platt!

6.19 pm

Jo Platt (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage), who is an excellent chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, even when she is telling me off for going over my allotted time.

Growing up in Manchester in the ’90s, I saw at first hand how culture can breathe new life into a city struggling with the aftermath of deindustrialisation. In the face of economic decline, it was community cinemas, street art and independent venues that became the beating heart of Manchester city centre. Spaces like Canal Street flourished, not just as a hub for Manchester’s LGBT community, but as part of a vibrant city centre that reflected the city’s cultural and inclusive spirit—all powered by the music, creativity and diversity that defined our nightlife scene. I am giving away my age.

That scene was accessible to me, as I grew up in Salford, right in the area that MediaCity now calls home. The BBC’s move marked the largest relocation of any public sector organisation outside London this century. Since then, Salford has seen a remarkable 142%

[Jo Platt]

growth in employment in the creative and digital sectors, along with a 70% increase in the number of digital and creative businesses. MediaCity stands as a powerful example of how the creative industries can deliver both economic and social benefits to local communities. That experience shaped my belief in the transformative power of culture to regenerate communities and drive economic revival. Culture turned the tide for Manchester, and I believe that today's generation deserves that same opportunity.

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): South Side Studios in Leighton Buzzard repurposes vacant spaces on the high street, which brings people to the high street. We also have the Peppercorn team, who want a cultural and heritage centre, which would bring people into the town centre. Does my hon. Friend agree that cultural industries can bring growth to not just cities, but our market towns as well?

Jo Platt: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point on an issue that I will come to. I think the Government will be focused on that change. For the Labour Government, this is a pivotal moment—a chance to make culture truly accessible for all, and to ensure that communities like mine in Leigh and Atherton experience culture as a driving force for positive change.

I have spoken many times in the Chamber about my previous role at Leigh Spinners Mill—I am sick of sending it copies of *Hansard*, as it costs me a fortune in postage—but by revitalising a once dormant 100-year-old cotton mill, we created a thriving creative hub where artists, musicians and creative businesses could set themselves up. It proves that towns like mine are full of rich, creative talent. That effort mirrors the important work done by the Music Venue Trust, which is dedicated to creating spaces where grassroots music can flourish. One such example is the Snug in Atherton, which has become a cornerstone of the town's nightlife, playing a crucial role in revitalising the town centre over the years. We see there a model of local ownership and community-driven success, which aligns perfectly with Labour's vision and the values of co-operatives. It fosters local empowerment and ensures that communities can take ownership of their spaces and their futures.

However, as much as we celebrate these successes, we must acknowledge the challenges facing the creative industries. Grassroots creative artists—particularly in towns like Leigh—have often felt left behind, and too many talented individuals feel overlooked by the larger cultural institutions, and excluded from the opportunities that they deserve.

I welcome the Minister's comments, and his focus on the creative industries. He is putting them at the heart of the forthcoming industrial strategy, which will play a key role in the Government's plan for change. I am not under the illusion that we will get some huge financial institution investing in Leigh, creating thousands of jobs—that is not going to happen. What we need is growth in our existing industries, and the many creative industries that keep our small towns working. We need to reassess funding models, rethink policy frameworks and build stronger educational pipelines to ensure that everyone, regardless of background or postcode, can access careers in culture, media and sport.

I would like to ask the Minister about the introduction of a well-publicised proposal that could be a game changer for visual artists: the smart fund. That initiative, backed by creative industry organisations, could unlock the economic potential of the sector by creating new support mechanisms for freelance artists and the wider visual arts sector. That would be a vital step towards bringing the UK into line with other countries, and ensuring that creators from all backgrounds have the support that they need to thrive.

It is essential that any funding reaches grassroots artists and organisations—those working in town centres and local communities. I am passionate about creating the physical and financial space for the creative industries to flourish, not just in cities, but in smaller towns like Leigh and Atherton. The impact of nurturing local talent cannot be overstated. It brings people together, creates jobs and builds stronger communities. I am sure that the Government are working hard to address the challenges facing the creative industries, including funding issues, the threat of AI and skills shortages. This is about more than just jobs or culture; it is about building stronger, more connected and more vibrant communities across our country.

6.26 pm

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): We have heard from many hon. Members about the power of art and the impact that culture can have on lives. From Shakespeare to The Smiths and from Hockney to Hitchcock, the UK has a proud cultural heritage that has touched all corners of the globe and continues to inspire millions. I am proud that my constituency of Wimbledon has played its part, hosting everything from the filming of the first "Carry On" film at Merton Park studios to the world premiere of Lionel Bart's "Oliver!". The University of the Arts London and countless creative businesses, not to mention three theatres and two cinemas, call Wimbledon home. However, it is clear that many challenges face the industry. The growth in generative AI and streaming platforms is changing and threatening many. Meanwhile, the pandemic and the cost of living crisis have left many creative businesses facing huge financial pressures. The debate is therefore welcome and could not come at a more important time.

Before I proceed further, I must declare my interest in the industry: I am the owner of a small cabaret bar in Covent Garden and chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the night time economy, and as such I am greatly concerned about what is happening at the grassroots. Somewhat more embarrassingly, I must confess that I am a failed creative. In my youth, I was the lead singer of an obscure new wave outfit, the Gotham City Swing Band. Although my motley crew and I made little impression on the music scene, we still have a small place in history: we were the final band to play the Roxy—the infamous birthplace of British punk—before it closed its doors for the final time that night.

Chris Bryant: Was that because of you?

Mr Kohler: The Minister has anticipated my joke. I will leave Madam Deputy Speaker to decide whether it was my performance that ended it all.

That brings me to the first issue that I would like to highlight: the crisis facing grassroots music venues. The Roxy played a crucial role in shaping British musical history; it provided a shared space for creatives, leading

to the formation of bands and genres that are still loved today. The Roxy was critical to the development of punk and so much that followed in its wake. Grassroots music venues fulfil that purpose, and help keep Britain at the forefront of music. Furthermore, in the age of streaming, when artists struggle to make a living from recordings, live performances are more crucial than ever in providing the essential income that fledgling musicians need. Grassroots venues are the backbone of the industry and provide millions of people with access to affordable live music. Without them acting as a pipeline for the music industry, there is no industry. However, they are disappearing at an alarming rate. The Music Venue Trust estimates that over a third of grassroots venues have closed over the past 20 years, and soaring rents, rising utility bills and the cost of living crisis are putting the remaining ones at risk. In 2023 alone, 125 of them—one in six—closed or stopped hosting live music.

Club music venues are also at risk. Britain's leading role in electronic and dance music is well documented, and nightclubs such as Fabric and Ministry of Sound are more than just places to dance; they are cultural institutions. However, due to increasing economic pressure, 10 clubs close every month. That is clearly not sustainable. How can we expect to produce the next generation's David Bowie, Norman Cook or Amy Winehouse if we have nowhere for them to play? If Britain wants to retain its position in the vanguard of popular culture, the closures must end.

It is disappointing, therefore, that the Government's recent decisions have only made the situation worse. Their first Budget brought the industry even closer to the brink. The Chancellor's decision in October to reduce business rates relief from 75% to 40% will put 350 grassroots music venues at immediate risk, with the potential loss of 12,000 jobs, as it will mean a more than doubling of their business rates. The Government must urgently rethink that measure. If they are serious about supporting our music industry, they must quickly take steps to ensure that venues can survive, including by recognising them as cultural, heritage and community assets in the same way that other cultural spaces, such as theatres and galleries, are protected.

It is not just music venues feeling the pinch. Local museums and galleries provide millions of people with access to inspiration and history on their doorstep, and a sense of place and community in an age of increasing division and isolation. We are lucky in Wimbledon. Merton Arts Space, based in Wimbledon library, provides a vital venue for exhibitions and community performances, while the Wimbledon museum and Wimbledon windmill provide residents and visitors alike with an important perspective on the past. The Polka theatre's award-winning productions inspire and entertain children from across south London and beyond, while the New Wimbledon theatre is the sixth largest in London and home to the wonderful Studio theatre.

However, in many places, such venues have long gone or are at risk. The Museums Association says that the civic museum sector faces an existential crisis, as local authority budgets are under increasing pressure and, with the cost of living crisis, many venues cannot rely on community donations to keep them going. The Government must take steps to provide local authorities with the funding they need to help keep these institutions going. Without them, our communities will suffer.

It is not just the decline of venues that is denying people access to the arts. Over the past decade, the Conservatives cut access to the arts in schools, with consistent deprioritisation of creative arts in the curriculum, and budget cuts. Access to arts education is not a luxury; it should be viewed as a right. Every child, regardless of background, deserves the chance to explore their creative potential. Currently, however, that is simply not the case.

There are fewer specialist teachers than ever before—since 2010, the number of creative arts teachers in the UK has fallen by 14%—and fewer students are studying the expressive arts to later stages of their education. In 2010, 40% of all GCSE entries were in such subjects; by 2023, that figure had halved. That is not due to a lack of demand—one just has to be around children and young people to see that they crave creativity—but due to the previous Government, for years, not taking seriously the task of creating the next generation of creatives.

The loss of teachers and decline in students not only deprives individuals of enriching experiences, but depletes the talent pipeline. Studies have repeatedly proved the positive impact that arts education can have on young people by boosting mental health, enhancing memory and increasing cultural awareness. Arts education is an investment worth making.

The lack of provision in schools is making creative education and therefore many careers in the arts increasingly the preserve of the wealthy, depriving our culture of different views, voices and perspectives. Although I appreciate that the Government have pledged to include arts and creative subjects provision in the curriculum review, they must take further steps. Schools' budgets are tighter than ever, and extra funding must be provided to ensure that they can provide a full, well-rounded educational offering.

We cannot afford to view the creative arts as a luxury. They are central to our economy, history and cultural identity. Creative industries contribute £125 billion to the UK economy and entertain, engage and employ millions of people across the country and the world. It is clear that if we want to maintain our place as a global cultural leader, we must invest in the future. The Government must act to support our musicians, artists and actors of the future. Without intervention, what was once a source of immense national pride will be just another footnote in an avoidable tale of national decline.

6.34 pm

Mr James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): It has been heartening to hear colleagues underscore the significance of the creative industries. The Chancellor of the Exchequer identified them as one of the eight drivers of economic growth, and the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the Minister here today have spoken passionately about their being our cultural and economic superpower. As representatives of the immense talent in Greater Manchester, the Secretary of State and I know well the enormous value brought by film, TV, gaming, publishing and, of course, music—a sector particularly close to my heart as a former musician, and singer of the only Manchester band nobody has heard of.

Across the UK, our creative industries are an ecosystem. Mutually supportive and interdependent, they are among the fastest-growing industries and have extraordinary

[Mr James Frith]

potential to drive our nation's No. 1 mission: economic growth. But the ecosystem is fragile and needs to be nurtured and supported in order to flourish, so we must take seriously, and respond to, the creative sector's reaction to the Government's consultation on AI in the sector.

Those in the sector are confused, alarmed and deeply concerned. Central to their fears is the framing of "rights reservations"—an opt-out system that threatens to rip the rug from under our prized sector, with sweeping changes proposed to copyright law. What is "rights reservations"? That which we call an opt-out system by any other name will still sound the alarm. Creators see it for what it is: an upheaval of the copyright protections they depend on, which threatens to do lasting damage to the sector. Copyright does not inspire hit songs, smash-hit movies or classical texts, but it is the lifeblood of our creative industries. It is what feeds investment, enabling musicians, writers, actors, designers, and businesses large and small, to earn a living from their work. Copyright is the foundation of what makes our creative industries what they are and could become.

Creativity is not an easy, anodyne process, and we should not outsource it to a method that reduces it to such. It takes blood, sweat, tears and countless hours. It does not just carry the creator's joys or perceptions, their struggles or vulnerabilities, but often speaks to our own. What connects us to our creative industries is the human emotion they embody. Yes, AI can, will and already does assist creators. Musicians and artists have embraced technological innovation throughout history, and AI holds exciting potential to help consumers discover and engage with creative works. But to forfeit the humanity it takes to create, and suggest that AI can replace it, insults and will ultimately cost those who pour their lives into their craft, as well as those of us who love to soak it all up.

Proposals for new, broad exceptions to copyright, and the burden of opting out of having one's life's work taken without permission, undermine the very principles of copyright and, frankly, of trade and commerce. The proposals are a threat to the livelihoods of creators, especially smaller rights holders who lack the resources to navigate complex systems or enforce protections against unauthorised AI use. Those smaller, independent creators form the bedrock of our creative ecosystem. Without them, the intricate web that sustains the sector will unravel. The richness of our cultural landscape depends not only on headline acts, but on the countless independent creators who bring diversity and depth to this sharing industry.

Proponents of unfettered AI access to copyrighted works, who say that denying it will stifle progress, leaving us behind other territories, describe a false choice and present a regressive argument that suggests we should sacrifice creators' rights for tech advances. What advance are we willing on, if it undermines the position of strength we start from? We already have divergence between territories on copyright, and the UK leads with strength here. Innovation should uplift us, not exploit. We do not need to weaken our cultural integrity and creative capital for a technological right of way.

All of us can find a space to love produced by our creative industries. In affirming this view, I wish also to distinguish between consumers and creators. Consumers

engage with creations at the finish line; they need not understand the hours of labour behind their creation or the securities on which they are created. That is absolutely fine, but legislators, policymakers and industry leaders must heed the creator's voice and recognise the existential threat that AI poses to their livelihoods if we forfeit copyright as we know it.

We must protect, cherish and celebrate the human spirit behind every brushstroke, investigation, edition, publication, note, verse and chorus, for they carry the joy, the struggle, the love and the loss, the hit and the miss. They express and emote. They relate and reflect to us our human condition: this human creativity—authentic, irreplaceable, deeply connected, often nebulous—defying the precise definition of AI. Artificial cannot replace authentic. Learned behaviour cannot replicate the human condition.

I hope this debate will amplify the voices of AI leaders who are advocating for the transparency and copyright frameworks that favour creators. The Government's consultation is absolutely right to highlight the need for transparency. AI firms should have to disclose what they are using in their training datasets. This will enable fair licensing arrangements, with the burden on the purchaser of creativity and not on the producers of it.

This is a pivotal moment for our creative sector. It comes down to this: will we protect copyright and creators' rights, or will we defer entirely to AI? We must not let proposals such as opt-out systems dismantle the protections that allow creativity to flourish. Let AI revolutionise our public services, productivity, precision and efficiency, but let the creative sector remain the authentic space that we all enjoy, as one of human expression. Creativity is not just a process; it profoundly connects us to one another and provides us with a shared humanity—not of just moments and movements but of memories that we live with forever. It falls to us to protect the muse, the struggle and the joys that define these marvellous creative industries. Let us ensure that creators, not algorithms, remain the first and last word in determining our cultural, economic and human advances.

6.42 pm

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate and indeed to echo what has been said by many Members on both sides of the House. I think this debate will produce pretty much unanimity on the importance of our creative industries. It is a particular pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage)—my successor but three, I believe, as Chairman of the Select Committee—and I am going to concentrate on one or two of the things she said.

It is happily now recognised how important the creative industries are to the UK's economy. There has been a growing awareness of this over a long period, ever since a separate Department was founded in the form of the Department of National Heritage, which became the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. The creative industries are something that the UK is extraordinarily good at. It is still the case that the best-selling music artists of all time, the Beatles, are British, as is the best-selling author of all time, Agatha Christie. And now, today, when we go to a Hollywood movie, the chances are that it will have been made in Pinewood, even though that is not immediately obvious from what we see on the screen.

Advertisements also originate in this country, as does publishing, as the Minister and many other Members have highlighted.

As the Minister said, there is an ecosystem whereby our most successful commercial creative enterprises rely on the subsidised sector, and vice versa. Let us take David Tennant as an example. He started life in “Hamlet” with the Royal Shakespeare Company, went on to “Doctor Who” and ended up in “Rivals”. I have seen all three, and they were all highly enjoyable. The subsidised sector has also benefited over the years from a Conservative invention, the national lottery. It has produced an enormous amount of money, which the taxpayer probably could not have afforded to invest, and many enterprises have benefited from that.

I echo what has been said about the importance of education and the need to ensure that arts are at the core of our curriculum, and also about the importance of grassroots music venues. I went to a Music Venue Trust reception last week, as a number of Members did. I was really interested to hear the remarks of the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler). I did not quite get to the Roxy, but I did go regularly to the Marquee club in Wardour Street, with its sweaty atmosphere, where I heard people such as Buzzcocks and the Clash, and great bands such as Iron Maiden, who started off life in those small venues. It is a shame that the Marquee club is no longer with us and that so many venues still struggle, but I must say that had it not been for the culture recovery fund, which my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport oversaw as Minister in the Department during the covid pandemic, there would be virtually no small venues, or indeed large venues, left in this country. The culture recovery fund kept venues from the Hot Box in Chelmsford all the way up to the Royal Albert Hall going. They were looking over the precipice until the Government stepped in.

The creative industries also bring enormous benefits to this country internationally. I, too, welcome the Government’s creation of the Soft Power Council. Having served as Chairman of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, I now sit on the Foreign Affairs Committee, and we continue to collaborate between Committees in looking at the importance of soft power. About two weeks ago, we heard from the British Council, which was mentioned earlier in the debate. The British Council does an extremely important job, and it is ridiculous that it has to go to the Government every year and ask to have the loan rolled over, and that it is staring at insolvency until an agreement is reached. I hope that is something that the Government will now address.

The British Council does many worthy things, but I have a soft spot for one thing in particular that it administers—I hope that both Ministers on the Front Bench share this—and that is the cultural protection fund. That is another initiative from this country in which we use our world-beating expertise from places such as the British Museum to help to ensure that some of the world’s greatest heritage is preserved, particularly when it is at risk from conflict.

We need to recognise that there is an increasingly competitive environment across the creative industries. British music is still extraordinarily successful, but 2023 was the first year when there was no British artist among the top 10 best-selling artists across the world. Four of the best-selling artists in the world in 2023

were Korean. That shows where the markets are developing. They are developing in south America, too. It is important that we continue to support creative industries such as the music industry through, for instance, the music export growth scheme, which was set up by the last Government and which I know this Government are continuing. I welcome that and hope that it will be maintained.

I also want to say a word about copyright, as almost every other speaker in this debate has done. I chair the all-party parliamentary group on intellectual property, and we recently had a meeting with the chairs of all the APPGs representing music, publishing, the visual arts and the media, who came together to listen to representatives of those creative industries express their deep concern about the Government’s suggestion that they might introduce an exception to the copyright protection, which would benefit AI.

There are good things about AI. It is not a threat to be beaten off; it can be of real value to the creative industries. Companies such as Universal Music are using AI, and it is a new technology that consumers and those industries will benefit from. At the same time, protection is needed to ensure that intellectual property rights are not abused. The Minister says that there is legal uncertainty, but the fact that intellectual property rights owners are defending their rights by going to court does not mean that the law is wrong. They are using the law, but that does not necessarily mean that the law is not perfectly clear.

We welcome elements of the Government’s proposals, and transparency is vital. If rights owners are to be able to protect their property, they first need to know where their property is being used. Transparency is the first essential requirement for that to happen, so I very much welcome the Government’s proposal to ensure transparency where AI large language models use content from across the internet to generate their own content.

The consultation highlights the alarm about a text and data mining exception. On one hand, the Government say they are consulting on that, but on the other hand, when the Secretary of State made his statement in the House just a couple of weeks ago, he said that the Government were accepting all of Matt Clifford’s recommendations. One of those recommendations is to introduce a text and data mining exception, so I hope the Minister can say something about that.

Chris Bryant: Matt Clifford made that recommendation—recommendation 24—and, in response, we have said that we are consulting. We have not decided; we are consulting. It is a consultation, not the Second Reading of a Bill.

Sir John Whittingdale: I am extremely grateful to the Minister, and it is of some reassurance that the Government’s mind is still open. I hope they will listen to the voices across the Chamber expressing concern.

There is an objection in principle to option 3, which is the idea that rights holders have to opt out. It reverses what has long been the case—that people can rely on the protection of their rights unless they choose to give them up. They should not have to ask for their rights to be protected, and that is what an opt-out system entails. There would no longer be automatic protection under an opt-out system, and it would put a huge burden on

[Sir John Whittingdale]

many small rights holders. There is a suggestion that photographers might have to seek an opt-out for every picture they have ever taken. Now, I hope that is not the case, but a lot of uncertainty has been created.

Each creative industry is different. As the Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society told us last week, writers may want their works to be used for some purposes but not for others, but it appears that this will be a binary system in which they either opt in or opt out.

This is also incredibly difficult to enforce. If somebody takes a picture of a painting on their phone and puts it on social media, how can the rights owner prevent it from being used by a large language model that goes out and absorbs all this content? As has already been said, there is no workable system in existence that allows for opting out. The EU has tried to introduce one and, as I am sure the Minister is fully aware, the robots.txt standard is supposed to identify—

Chris Bryant: It's useless.

Sir John Whittingdale: The Minister is entirely right—it is useless.

The problem, therefore, is that there is no workable solution at the moment. The Minister and the Government have said that they will not introduce this option until there is a workable system in existence. That is reassuring, but how will the Minister decide whether a proposed system is indeed workable? If it is workable, how will it be enforced? Will individual rights holders have to go to court if they believe they have opted out but find that their works are still being used? There is a whole host of questions.

I recognise the Minister's commitment and wish to find a way to protect rights, but there are an awful lot of questions at the moment, and there do not appear to be any answers. I hope he can address some of those questions.

6.54 pm

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): I rise not just as a member of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee or as co-chair of the APPG on artificial intelligence, but as an academic with first-hand experience of building AI models. I will try to make a case—go with me on this one—that protecting our creative industry and the high-quality output it produces is vital not just to our vibrant creative sector, but to our rapidly evolving AI sector.

Back in the mists of time, when I was building a model for my PhD, I resisted the temptation to build a large dataset from any relevant data I could find. Instead, I chose to produce a smaller, high-quality dataset, which was risky, as it might not have been enough to create a reliable model and I might not have passed my PhD. My risk paid off. My model worked better than expected and, ever since, I have adhered to the principle that it is the quality of our data, not its quantity, that matters.

To mangle a metaphor, some say that data is the new oil or gold. Taking that metaphor forward, let us do a thought experiment. Let us say that the UK discovered vast reserves of gold, making us the second biggest provider globally. What should we do? Would we look at gold-hungry organisations and give them the gold for free, in the hope that they will invest in the UK? I should hope not.

By some estimates, the UK creative industry is the second largest globally. It is our gold. Should we give away this valuable asset for free? I hope not, for the sake of our creatives, but also for our new AI industry, in which this Government are rightly investing. The unlicensed and illegal use of copyrighted content for generative AI development has been equated by some with a form of theft. Not only is it unfair to make such acquisition legal via an opt-out system, but it risks creating a future of fool's gold data as our creative industry loses control of its work and moves elsewhere, or simply gives up.

High-quality data is essential for the success of generative AI, but, as with gold—to overkill the metaphor—its reserves may be finite. Researchers predict that at the current rate, generative AI developers will have used all the publicly available stock of human-created text data between 2026 and 2032. In other words, we could run out next year. This means that, with limited new high-quality data, innovation and AI growth will be hindered, inviting model collapse.

Model collapse happens when generative AI models start training on their own lower-quality data. This is the fool's gold of AI. If we wish to be competitive, both in the creative and AI industries, we as a country need to set ourselves above our competitors, not below them. We do this not by giving away our most valuable assets for free, but by protecting them so that we can keep generating more and more new high-quality data.

Generative AI developers, like all AI developers, are extremely data-hungry and keen to mine, mine, mine. If all we have left to offer them is fool's gold—if our world-class British artists have to look elsewhere to make a living—the AI developers will likewise look elsewhere. Protecting our creative industry by not allowing the free use of data for model training purposes is therefore the right thing to do not only for our creative industry, but for our AI industry.

I therefore ask the Government to consider a longer-term view and retain the UK's current copyright framework, to place the onus on generative AI developers to seek a licence for our creatives' data—with a possible caveat for academic research—and to expand it to cover all generative AI models marketed in the UK. In conjunction, we must require meaningful transparency on data usage in a form that is accessible to artists and regulators. That would allow for enforceable regulation and enable the actual data creators, our creatives, to seek redress. I resist, as I always do, claims that that would inhibit innovation and growth. Based on my experience as a researcher and AI ethicist, I reject the notion that regulation inhibits innovation. It simply does not. Transparency of model development and data sources plus enforceable regulations are vital to encourage high standards and good quality AI.

By retaining our copyright framework and pioneering a licensing approach, we would guarantee that rights holders have control over their own creative output. Such an approach would give confidence to our creatives, allowing them to pursue sustainable, well-paid and productive careers, and provide enjoyment to us all, income and growth for the country and the high-quality output that is so valuable to generative AI developers. By taking that approach, we will remain what we are today—the gold standard of the creative industries—and that will enable us to rise up as the gold standard for AI development.

7 pm

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): In Wales, we have had an incredibly rich creative inheritance, and we still have that today. Even our rousing national anthem honours the Welsh poets and singers who came before us. One example of that is the Urdd Eisteddfod, where around 15,000 young people compete in creative competitions, spanning from singing to poetry to dancing, and anything in between. Young people in Wales have the ability to participate creatively in our society, but their talent is often extracted from our local communities.

Professor Michael Woods from Aberystwyth University highlights that the creative industries could be an antidote to outward migration from Wales. He suggests that creative hubs in rural areas could retain young people in Wales, especially as his research showed that the creative arts were the main reason most would stay in my constituency of Caerfyrddin. A fabulous example of one of those creative hubs is Yr Egin in Carmarthen. It houses the S4C headquarters, provides employment and boosts the local economy. Recent research shows it contributed £7.6 million to Carmarthenshire's economy alone between 2022 and 2023. Yr Egin plays a vital role in promoting our language and culture in Wales. It is not alone in that. Other creative organisations across Wales, including Cwmni Da, Fran Wen, and Aria Studios in Llangefni, also amplify the voice of our land and culture on both local and international stages.

Individuals need access to opportunities and upskilling to participate in the creative industries. Teledwyr Annibynnol Cymru does great work in providing essential training for TV, film, radio and new media. Some 1,800 people have been trained over the past few years at over 125 different courses. The courses are Welsh medium or bilingual, thus providing specialist staff for the industry.

I was really disappointed to hear about cuts at two prominent Welsh institutions: the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama has cut its junior department and National Theatre Wales is closing due to financial constraints. Despite ongoing training efforts, those cuts, as well as others elsewhere in the sector, leave Welsh creatives at a disadvantage compared with others across the UK. We are very fortunate and appreciate that the wonderful Mr Michael Sheen is establishing a Welsh National Theatre, but the future of our creative industries should not lie solely on the shoulders of one individual. We have a collective responsibility to protect those industries.

Creative industries in Wales generated a £3.8 billion turnover across 2022 and 2023, which accounted for 5.3% of the total Welsh GDP. A cornerstone of that success is S4C, which directly employed 1,900 people and generated £136 million for the Welsh economy. It is crucial that S4C is given equal standing with other British broadcasters during the royal charter review, ensuring that the voices of people across Wales are heard, our culture is represented and Wales does not miss out on financial opportunities.

The current tax relief system disadvantages S4C, because according to current rules, only TV projects with production costs of at least £1 million per broadcast hour are eligible for a tax rebate of up to 25%. As S4C is very efficient, it spends less than £250,000 per broadcast hour so it does not meet the threshold to qualify for the support. I call on the Government to reconsider that to ensure our creative industries continue to thrive.

Our Government must lead on protecting our creative industries, from local to global, because they drive the economy, employ millions of people and contribute in Wales to our culture, Welsh language and overall wellbeing. The creative arts are Wales. As a former peripatetic music teacher and as a singer—not in any big bands, as some hon. Members have been—I would like to read the first verse of “In Passing” by Brian Harris.

“To be born in Wales,
Not with a silver spoon in your mouth,
But, with music in your blood
And with poetry in your soul,
Is a privilege indeed.”

Indeed it is a privilege.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I do not intend to put a formal time limit on speeches yet, but there are lots of Members standing, so it would be helpful if Members could restrict themselves to between six and seven minutes.

7.6 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Madam Deputy Speaker, if I were to ask you to name a city in the UK that is a hotbed of creativity—

Chris Bryant: Stoke-on-Trent? [*Laughter.*]

Gareth Snell: The Minister has stolen my thunder! As always, he has pre-empted what I was going to say. I was going to say that Stoke-on-Trent is a city that is steeped in history, but fizzing for the future of creativity. We are home to nine Arts Council England national portfolio organisations; we have a burgeoning CreaTech cluster in the Spode building; and we have some of the best performances of theatre-in-the-round at the New Vic theatre, which although not in Stoke-on-Trent is so close to the border it might as well be.

I highlight these points not for the flippant response I should have pre-empted from the Minister, but because all too often when we think about places where creativity happens and where arts and culture thrive, we do not think about places such as Stoke-on-Trent or other historical industrial cities. All too often, those places are written up as wastelands, with derelict buildings shown in articles in *The Guardian*, rather than the focus being on the things that make them special and strong: our heritage and our future.

Stoke-on-Trent is the only city in the UK that has world craft city status for our industrial history in the potteries. Some of the great creatives of our past are intrinsically linked to Stoke-on-Trent: Wedgwood, Spode, William Moorcroft, Clarice Cliff and Susie Cooper. They are people who had creativity not only in their artistry, but in their industry. They pioneered new methods of working so that we could have the finest bone china, and came up with new techniques for design; the illustrations on the plates, cups and tiles that we all enjoy were at the cutting edge of new methods, technologies, pigments and materials. The creativity that they drew upon as part of their industrial heritage remains, and we have the same skills and burning ambition to demonstrate who we are and what we do in Stoke-on-Trent today.

[Gareth Snell]

Some 4,000 jobs in Stoke-on-Trent are linked directly to the creative sector; if the supply chain is included, it would easily be two or three times that number. Some 638 artists and artist organisations are recognised by the Stoke-on-Trent and North Staffordshire Cultural Education Partnership. In 2019, there were 5.5 million tourist visits to Stoke-on-Trent—a narrative that we do not often hear from those who seek to denigrate the city I am proud to call home and represent in this place. Sadly, some of that snobbish approach to my city comes from our nearest neighbours, who seek to use the challenges that our city faces for their own short-term political gain. I doubt that will stop any time soon. However, we are home to “The Great Pottery Throw Down”, which is on Channel 4 on Sunday evenings; Keith Brymer Jones and the team have made pottery glamorous Sunday night TV viewing. It demonstrates that the history of who we are is still very much part of the society and city that we want to be.

Dr Gardner: I recently visited the impressive and very funky 1882 ceramics firm based in the World of Wedgwood in my Stoke-on-Trent South constituency, home of “The Great Pottery Throw Down”. The firm impressed upon me its challenges in attracting young apprentices, risking the loss of important creative heritage skills. Does my hon. Friend agree that we must remember the value of pottery and sculpture in our education curriculum review to protect this vibrant industry?

Gareth Snell: I agree with my hon. Friend. Our city has children in school who are unaware of our cultural heritage, which is their cultural heritage, and who do not play with clay in the way they should. We have schools that decommissioned their kilns, despite the fact that the children’s parents and grandparents would have trained in those schools, gone into the industry and made good lives for themselves from honest, hard work in what was essentially one of the country’s earliest creative industries.

My hon. Friend is also right about the pipeline of talent. The big creative companies in Stoke-on-Trent tell me that the University of Staffordshire is generating some of the highest quality, most talented graduates in the country. When it comes to computer games, technical productions and animations, the courses at the University of Staffordshire are rated as some of the best, if not the best, in the country. Only this week, three of the big digital creative bodies in Stoke-on-Trent—i-Creation, Lesniak Swann and VCCP—announced their new summer internship. That programme lines young graduates up with professionals working in the creative industry, and shows them what their job and career could be—a job and a career that has value, pride and potential economic benefits for my city, because of the nature of the work that we can bring in.

The Minister will know about the litany of success stories in our city from a Westminster Hall debate that he kindly responded to a few weeks ago. I will not bore the House by repeating that list this evening. Let me simply say that when the Government consider the future of the creative industries and where the talent pool should be—I know that the Minister agrees, so I hope that he reiterates it when he winds up—we should

bear in mind that if we can make it work in places such as Stoke-on-Trent, we can make it work anywhere. Young people in my city who enjoy creative education and want to go on to do wonderful things, whether in music, drama, dance, tech or ceramics and pottery, deserve the same opportunities as a child from London or any metropolitan city in the north of England. I hope that, as the new Government foster a new partnership with places such as Stoke-on-Trent, the creative industries can be central to it, so that the names we speak of in 20 or 30 years’ time, when we undoubtedly have this debate again, will be the names of those young people.

7.13 pm

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): I regret that I do not have the extensive music lyric knowledge of my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage). Neither did I have a career in a rock band like the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler), who, from what he said, seems to have been single-handedly responsible for shutting down a favourite music venue. I have a constituency with a small but growing and thriving creative sector on the Isle of Wight. I am grateful to the Minister for taking my earlier intervention.

I will say something about my constituency in a moment, but I will briefly reflect on the national picture. Clearly, there is a consensus across the House that the creative sector is hugely important and needs continuing support from the Government. From 2010 to 2022, it was one of the fastest growing sectors in the UK economy, growing by 50%. I was encouraged by the Minister’s warm words from the Dispatch Box, but clearly support for the creative industries has to go further than warm words. I have no doubt that he is sincere about backing them up with action, but we cannot take that for granted. Neither can we ignore the damaging effects of decisions in the Budget. It was entirely right that the shadow Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew), raised the negative impact of the increases to national insurance employer contributions on the creative sector.

We have rightly heard much in the last few months about the negative impact of national insurance contribution rises on businesses, large companies, and the health sector, and I will continue to make those arguments, but I worry that the negative impact on the creative industries has not fully been recognised. Other Opposition Members mentioned it. I hope that the Minister has done this already, but I urge him to ensure that the Treasury does something to compensate the creative industries for the money that this rise will take. He might distribute £60 million, but it will mean little if some, or most, of it is taken back by the Treasury in taxes.

The Isle of Wight is well known for lots of things, and is increasingly known as a location for films. That is helped by Osborne House, the former home of Her Majesty Queen Victoria. Films based on her life are often shot on location there, though I have to say that it is not in my constituency but the neighbouring constituency of Isle of Wight West. We have small creative organisations such as Ventnor Exchange, Monkton Arts, and Department in Ryde, which is due to open next month with money from the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. We also have historical buildings that are kept alive only by the creative industries that operate in and around them,

such as Shanklin theatre, which could not survive without all the volunteer work that is done. In small and large towns across the country, fantastic buildings are kept alive only because of the creative industries that make use of them.

I thank the Minister for the offer of a meeting with him or his Department about a film studio on the Isle of Wight. Allow me to make a correction: sadly, the location for the film studio is in the neighbouring constituency of Isle of Wight West. I have already notified the hon. Member for Isle of Wight West (Mr Quigley) that he has received an offer of a meeting through me, which I am sure he will be delighted about. I would like to join him if I can be of assistance, because clearly it will benefit both constituencies on the Isle of Wight to realise that studio. The issue is that while micro-organisations benefit from pots of funding that are suitable for small-scale projects, and clearly national projects of national interest can access money, medium-sized projects such as rural film studios possibly struggle. I look forward to a conversation about that another time.

7.18 pm

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): The creative industries are rightly a priority for our Government, and I warmly welcome the Minister's speech, as will our creatives in the coastal communities of Scarborough and Whitby. Having been a screenwriter by trade, I declare my membership of the Writers' Guild of Great Britain. This has been a fascinating debate, and I rise to ask whether, in our headlong rush to embrace the white heat of scientific revolution, we are at risk of extinguishing the spark of original human creativity. Sparks were indeed flying in the 1982 cult sci-fi film "Blade Runner"; Ridley Scott drew upon the landscape where he grew up—the flaring oil stacks of the refineries in the north-east, sending up big fireballs of gas—to create a dystopian future world where humans battle synthetic humans known as replicants.

As we move into a future where artificial intelligence is no longer the stuff of sci-fi films but the tool that will revolutionise our lives, we should pause to ensure that we safeguard our original content creators, because unless we tighten copyright laws around intellectual property to protect creators, AI data mining will stem the flow of creative content. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) mentioned, the AI systems that mine content to gain artificial intelligence could run out of new material in the next few years—this is known as model collapse—and generative AI models could start training on their own low-quality outputs. To return to "Blade Runner", the replicants would be breeding with the replicants.

To enjoy a future that protects human creativity, we should reform the UK text and data mining regime to place the onus on GAI firms to seek permission from rights holders to use their original published work. Amendments tabled by Baroness Kidron to the Data (Use and Access) Bill, which will be discussed shortly in the other place, offer meaningful transparency provisions that would make the UK's gold-standard copyright regime enforceable and counter the widespread theft of intellectual copyright by AI companies. The amendments chime with public opinion, and I ask the Minister to reflect on whether the Government will support them.

I finish with dialogue from "Blade Runner"—words spoken by the replicant Roy Batty:

"I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain."

We must act to protect our creative talent in the UK—the screenwriters who wrote those unforgettable lines, and all future writers. In the fight to win the battle for intellectual copyright, surely we must be on the side of the human, not the replicant.

7.22 pm

Zöe Franklin (Guildford) (LD): I declare an interest, as I have received donations from Stellar Entertainment.

My constituency of Guildford is a fantastic and varied creative hub for the south-east, and I could speak on the subject at length, but today I want to champion one of our great success stories and advocate for a fair deal for the UK's fantastic creative industries. Guildford is often described as the Hollywood of the UK gaming industry. It is a hub of innovation and creativity that has put our town on the global map. While Guildford's gaming studios continue to achieve extraordinary success with games such as "LittleBigPlanet", "Baldur's Gate 3" and "No Man's Sky" to name just a few, there is much more that we can do to support the sector, and the creative arts industry more widely, and ensure their continued growth.

We would not have the talent we have today without strong education and skills. Our young people deserve the tools to thrive in the industries of tomorrow, and that includes the computer games industry. That is why I back calls for the introduction of a digital creativity GCSE. The qualification would equip students with the skills they need for a career in video game development, visual effects and other digital creative fields. It would also signal that the UK values those industries and is serious about nurturing home-grown talent, but this issue goes beyond skills; it is also about who gets to be part of the industry's success. Women, people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and ethnic minorities remain under-represented in the gaming industry. The lack of diversity not just perpetuates inequality, but holds the industry back. Creative content thrives when it draws from a wide range of perspectives and cultures. If we recruit from only one demographic, gender or economic group, the result is a duller, less innovative industry. That is yet another reason to enable access to high-quality, industry-supported training, and to the creative arts, in every state school in the UK.

Liberal Democrats believe that nurturing the creative arts is crucial. We believe in investing in education, acknowledging diversity and creating opportunities for everyone to succeed. The UK's creative industries are an economic powerhouse and source of inspiration for people around the world. Where we lead, others enthusiastically follow. One aspect of that global leadership is our copyright laws, which are widely considered to be some of the best in the world. They not only give strong protection to creators but make reasonable allowance for legitimate use in research, criticism and news reporting. In the light of the growing use of AI, and the Government's recent announcements on the subject, creators from across the industry have spoken to me, and clearly to other Members, about their concerns that proposed changes will put the rights of creators at risk.

[Zöe Franklin]

I want to be clear: creators I speak to are generally optimistic about the potential benefits of AI for their work. Creators are not fearful of AI; they are fearful that their intellectual property will no longer be protected, and that their livelihoods will be put at risk. The opt-out model the Government are championing on AI and copyright has been shown, through its European equivalent, not to work. My hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) set that out in great detail, and I am grateful to him for that.

I ask the Minister to ensure that he engages thoroughly with the creative industries on this issue to find alternatives that work for creatives. We need to take the lead globally on it. Other nations are watching the approach we take, and will follow suit, as they do in many other areas relating to the creative industries. The creative arts are a lifelong passion of mine, and I am pleased that one of my sons is training for a career in the performing arts, but I am worried that his future will be in jeopardy, just as many worry about their future, if we continue on this path when it comes to copyright and intellectual property.

We do not spend enough time in this Chamber in conversation about the UK's world-leading creative industries and creativity, which is fundamental to what it means to be human. I am grateful for the opportunity for this debate, and I hope that the Government will take on board the sensible points raised across the House, so that together we can ensure that the UK continues to be a global leader in the creative industries.

7.27 pm

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): I am glad to contribute to the debate, and while I may not have any books with film options, or be a former rockstar, I have family and friends who work in the creative industries, be it in film, music or magazines. Our creative industries are one of the most valuable growth sectors in the UK, generating £125 billion for the economy in 2023 and accounting for one in seven jobs across the country. Perhaps most importantly, the creative industries embedded in our towns and cities have intrinsic cultural value. They provide shared social experiences that contribute to a sense of place, build on local heritage and contribute to our health and wellbeing.

Luton has a rich history of artistic innovation, creativity and design. For over 200 years, we were the primary place in the UK for the production of ladies' hats. The industry peaked in the 1930s, when we produced over 70 million hats annually. Of course, that is why our beloved Luton Town FC are known as the Hatters. Artistry has been at the heart of our town's economy across three centuries, and we hold on to that with pride today. We are a place of making—historically, hats and cars; now, computer systems, games, films and music.

We are lucky enough to have several independent music venues in Luton, including the Hat Factory arts centre, the Bear Club, and the Castle, one of Luton's oldest and most beloved pubs, which is supporting Independent Venue Week this week. It is putting on six nights of live music and supporting the independent arts, alongside the 200 other venues taking part across the country. We cannot overestimate the value of our grassroots music venues and the platform they give to new and emerging artists, offering them their first opportunities to perform

and develop their craft and providing the essential pipeline for tomorrow's megastars and household names. Indeed, when Luton hosted Radio 1's Big Weekend in May 2024, one of our town's very own, Myles Smith, featured on BBC Music's Introducing stage, and he has since performed on Jools Holland's show. He broke the United States on tour and won the rising star Brit award, and this year he has been nominated for three Brit awards. That success highlights the value of exposure for independent artists.

I was somewhat surprised by the comments from the Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson earlier about supporting arts and culture. I accept the points made by others about the culture recovery fund, but our creative industries were held back under the Tories. Arts funding fell by almost 50% per person in real terms, and local government revenue funding for culture and related services decreased by 48% in England, alongside rising costs and demand pressures on statutory services. Those funding cuts have enacted enormous damage to the pipeline of talent in the industry, to the provision of local arts and to the availability of work in the performing arts. In 2012, university grants delivering courses such as music, drama and other arts subjects were cut by 50%, which was particularly detrimental for disabled, black, Asian and minority ethnic students and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. That created an additional obstacle for students who already faced multiple barriers to studying subjects such as music in higher education.

If we really want to break down barriers to opportunity, we must ensure that there is adequate access to a dedicated arts and music curriculum for students at every point in their education, and I very much welcome the Minister's earlier comments on that issue. Such access is fundamental not only to support talent to thrive, but to ensure that children develop. Studies have found that children exposed to music tuition display better cognitive performance in their reading and comprehension skills.

I thank Luton Music Service and all the volunteer parents for the great work they do with children and young people in my constituency. I would also like to say how much I enjoyed the Christmas performances by the show choir, the senior guitars, the junior strings, the funk band and the rock band, among the many other groups that performed that weekend, who displayed immense talent.

I am glad that this Labour Government have recognised the value of our creative industries and that we are working to reverse the damage done under the previous Conservative Government. I welcome the £60 million package of support announced this month to drive growth, including the £40 million investment for start-up video game studios, British music and film exports, and creative businesses outside London. I also welcome the launch of the Soft Power Council, which brings together experts from across culture, sport, the creative industries and geopolitics to showcase the best of Britain around the world.

Our creative industries have been underfunded and undervalued for too long, but I am confident that as we prioritise the arts and creative industries within our industrial strategy, the UK will have a firm standing on the world stage, boosting economic growth, unlocking opportunities and leading as industry innovators.

7.32 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. It has been a long time since we have had the Floor of the House of Commons for a debate on the creative industries, and it is always a fantastic debate.

Chris Bryant *indicated assent.*

Pete Wishart: I see the Minister nodding along. We find out about all the dynamic enterprises and cultural activity in Members' constituencies but, more than that, we find out about our colleagues' hidden talents. I was as surprised as anybody to hear that we have a veteran of the punk days at the Roxy, as well as singers and film writers. We have an abundance of talent in the House, so I feel a bit more confident now: I lost my colleagues in MP4 when they stood down at the last election, so I am actively recruiting, and my door is open to any aspiring musician who wants to perform in MP4.

As usual in these debates, there has been a chorus of approval, support and satisfaction—as there should be—when it comes to the quality of the UK creative industries. We just do these things so well, and that quality has been ingrained in our cultural output. There is something that we do across the whole of these isles that just produces this conveyor belt of talent, imagination and creativity. We have successful creative industries because of the imagination of the people of this country. Is it not great that we can turn around and say that we could power our economy based on the creativity, invention and imagination of the people who inhabit these isles? But we need more than that to be successful. These things are mostly down to the creativity of the people who work in our creative industries, but we also need the right conditions: we need to provide the context and the environment for these creative industries to survive, develop and thrive.

For the last 60 years, we have been quite good at doing that. We have intervened when necessary. We have had conversations and debates about investment, what sort of support should go into the creative industries and whether we get the balance right. Of course, there have been political debates about Budgets and national insurance contributions, but we have basically had the right conditions for art and creativity, and the industry that comes with them, to develop and thrive. We have those things because we have an IP system embedded in UK law that is the envy of the world. It is the bedrock of our creative industries and the foundation of our success. Part of that is our wonderful copyright regime, which, again, is the envy of the world. It makes sure that artists are properly compensated for the wonderful works they produce, and ensures that they get recognised for the works they deliver.

We tamper with all of that at our peril. We have been here before. Back in the 2010s, when copyright exceptions were quite the fashion, the threat to so many of our creative industries was not from AI companies; it was from the internet service providers, the pirates and digitisation. Isn't it funny that it is always the creative industries that are on the frontline when there are technical innovations? It is always the creative industries that seem to have to suffer because of what we are trying to achieve through technological innovation.

Looking around the Chamber, I think that only the Minister and the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) are veterans of the Digital Economy Act 2017. That was probably the high point of the interest in copyright exceptions. Then, of course, the general philosophical debate was all around an unfettered internet that was to be free at the point of use for everybody. There was this absurd business model that we could somehow have all this high-quality content, and we would not have to pay for any of it. Of course, that was quickly knocked on its head, but we have its legacy with the arrival of the huge tech platforms, with tech brothers getting together and developing their own companies. We have massive tech companies that provide nothing other than platforms and that create very little of the content, and they are growing rich and fat off the creativity and invention of the people who actually provide that content—the artists and musicians themselves. The value gap between the musician, or the artist, and these big platforms and companies is something that we will have to address.

However, I do not think that we have ever had such a threat as generative AI; that is what we are looking at now. It says in my notes that I should have a go at the Minister now for having already made up his mind, but I am actually a bit reassured by what he said, and I think all of us should be encouraged. I really did think that the Government had made up their mind; I thought that they were going to go down the opt-out route without qualification. All the things they have said up to this point certainly seemed to confirm that, and the Minister's grumpy tone during the statement on these issues did not help matters much, particularly when he had a go at the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. It is good to have that reassurance, but what we now have to do—I am looking at colleagues who have contributed to the debate and expressed their concerns—is encourage the Minister gently, through persuasion. He knows the view of the industry and the sector, and I think he knows that it is overwhelmingly negative. He will not be able to find anybody in any creative sector who is telling him that what he proposes with the opt-out will work or is good for the creative industries or even for AI.

We have heard from several colleagues about this idea of a model breakdown, where AI starts to feed on itself. That is what we can expect, and I think the analogy with "Blade Runner" was fantastic. That is exactly where we will be going if we allow unfettered AI development to continue along the same lines. We have reached a really interesting point tonight. I think the Government are probably going to reconsider their position. They are going to take on board what Members have said—

Chris Bryant *indicated dissent.*

Pete Wishart: I see the Minister shaking his head, but perhaps he will clarify all this when he gets to his feet. I know that the Government think they have a solution that somehow supports both the AI sector and the creative industries sector, but nobody actually believes that. I am sorry, Minister, but no one could go along with the idea that somehow, opening up the nation's creative works to be scraped and mined would ever get us to a situation that could possibly be useful for the creative industries. I do not think it would be useful for

[Pete Wishart]

the AI sector, either. That is a really important point when it comes to all of this, and we need to look at it properly.

Lastly, we have heard a few myths, including the idea that there is somehow unclarity about the laws that embed our copyright regime. That is just nonsense—nobody actually believes that. I do not think that even AI companies would say that there is any question about the legality of the copyright regime; it is just something that Ministers trawl out to try to create uncertainty in the sector, and it does not work. The one thing that is absolutely certain is that if we do allow AI companies to engage in unfettered text and data mining, there will be real difficulties. Some of the scenarios that have been painted by other Members who have spoken will be realised, and that will be very damaging for this Government.

We know that the Government are invested in AI. They are in an economic mess, and they are looking to grab at anything that will give them some sort of comfort. AI is obviously one of the areas they have identified that might bring this promised growth, giving them some sort of confidence and reassurance that what they are trying to do with the economy might get it to where they are seeking to take it, but we cannot be obsessively fixated on AI at the cost of so much of our heritage and culture. Where it is right that this Government proceed with AI, they have to take a balanced approach, one that looks after the interests of our nation's creators, inventors and artists. So far, they have not been able to do so, but there are encouraging signs, so I am looking forward to the Minister's response this evening. I hope that what he says will encourage us further.

7.41 pm

Nesil Caliskan (Barking) (Lab): It has been a pleasure to listen to speeches from Members right across the Chamber, and particularly to hear—as others have said—insights rooted in the particular musical and literary talents of Members. Sadly, I have zero contribution to make in terms of talent; I can inform Members that I have regularly enjoyed the outputs of music on many a dance floor, particularly during my student days, but that is as far as my talents will take me. I also want to acknowledge the powerful points made about AI—it is a complicated picture, and will be an important continuing debate.

That will be incredibly important as we consider the creative industries as one of Britain's success stories. They are some of our most successful exports and biggest growth opportunities—a way of projecting our soft power across the world, as other Members have said. The creative industries add £120 billion in value to our economy, and have grown by 35% since 2010. Economically, those industries are an important area for debate, accounting for one in seven jobs in the country.

That success has taken place despite inaction from the Government of the past. In recent years, the investment per person that allows people to access those creative cultural experiences has fallen by 50% in real terms, and funding for the arts and cultural organisations has fallen by 18% in the past 14 years. As my hon. Friend the Member for Luton South and South Bedfordshire (Rachel Hopkins) referenced, £1 billion was cut from

local authorities. Those cuts have undoubtedly had a generational impact on the young people who lost out on opportunities to experience cultural activities.

As a London MP and an ex-London council leader, I can tell the House that even in the cultural hub that is London—the best city in the world for cultural activity, some might say—many communities, including those I represent in Barking and Dagenham, do not have access to creativity, be that dance or music lessons, going to the theatre or cinema trips. That is why access programmes, including for my constituents in Barking, are so important—access to jobs and opportunities within the industry, and to enjoy more forms of art and culture, the art and culture that my communities in Barking and Dagenham so often refer to as their inspiration.

Local authorities are leading the way in establishing and supporting creative industries to help to grow their local economy, provide new opportunities for those who need them and encourage more access to the arts. It is important to welcome the activities that local authorities up and down the country have engaged in even when they have been under so much pressure. When I was a council leader, I worked towards the transformation of an industrial site from a poorly used employment space to a film studio owned by the local authority and leased to a film company based in Hollywood, used for films featuring actors from across the world. That was not unique to the area I represented at the time; as I say, councils across the country are doing such things.

As the Member of Parliament for Barking, I am so proud that in Barking and Dagenham, Welbeck Wharf—originally a steel distribution site, bought by the local authority and leased to The Wharf Studios—is home to the largest new film studio in 25 years. Since 2022, the council has worked with the studios to tackle the skills gap in the borough, which is significant, and the diversity gap in the film industry. The studios have engaged with local schools and colleges and provided new training and job opportunities. More than 1,000 pupils have been given hands-on experience in skills such as lighting, camera work, production and make-up, and many local people have been employed in filming in the borough. More than 1,000 residents have attended free screening events, providing access to new culture and arts in a way that simply would not have been possible before.

I am particularly excited that the world-famous Tate gallery and the borough of Barking and Dagenham have reached agreement on a new memorandum of understanding that could see a new Tate collection open in Barking Riverside, and I put on record my support for that proposal. Such investment in the area I represent will make a huge contribution to Barking and Dagenham. In many instances, success is the result of private and public partnerships. I know that the sector welcomes the Government's £60 million investment in the creative industries, as well as its core part in the new industrial strategy.

I am concerned about reports that most tax relief—around half for film production and 75% for TV production—goes to those that make the very largest claims. In fact, according to HMRC data, half of the total film relief claimed went to just 15 companies. That is why I welcome the new relief that the Government have announced for smaller, independent film productions. I think it will make a real difference to areas that want more films to be made, and that want the cultural

industries to contribute to the local economy. The growth of creative industries in the UK will contribute to our economy, in part because of the international investment they attract. As that investment takes place and as the creative industries benefit from tax breaks, however, local communities such as those I represent in Barking and Dagenham must benefit from that economic vibrancy. They must benefit from jobs and skills opportunities, and we should hold the creative industries to account for that.

In 2017, my constituency featured heavily in the music charts, thanks to rapper Ramz's debut single "Barking"—I am not going to sing it—which included the lyrics

"I might link my ting from Barking."

That was one of the things that made me instantly slightly cooler when I was selected to be the candidate for Barking at the general election. I hope that as the Government, business and local authorities continue to foster creative industries, Barking will feature not only in the music charts, but in award-winning cinema and other outputs from those industries. They make an incredible contribution to our economy, and residents in Barking and Dagenham can benefit from a Government who are supportive of the creative industries.

7.49 pm

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): I want to add my voice to those of hon. Members who have spoken about the crucial role of the creative industries in the UK economy. The Minister may be relieved that I will not be taking him to task tonight for the broadband and mobile coverage in rural parts of my constituency.

The creative industries are among the UK's most dynamic and fastest-growing sectors. In the 12 years between 2010 and 2022, the sector grew by more than 50%, compared with growth in the rest of the economy of some 22%. In 2022 alone, the creative industries contributed a staggering £125 billion to the UK economy and employed 2.4 million people. This is a great British success story.

Despite the sector's impressive contribution to the economy, it faces significant challenges following the autumn Budget. The increases in national insurance contributions pose a significant financial burden for many creative businesses, and despite Labour Members' protestations about so-called Conservative cuts, they seem unaware that the DCMS Budget for next year will be lower than that for this year. As is the case for SMEs in sectors right across the country, this Budget has punished many of those who serve as our growth engine. It is estimated that more than 350 grassroots music venues are at immediate risk of closure, potentially leading to a loss of more than 12,000 jobs and £250 million across the overall economy. The Music Venue Trust outlines in its response to the Budget a clear threat to both the live music industry and the many jobs it supports.

For an example of how the creative industries are trying to weather these challenges, we need look no further than Somerset Film, which is based in my constituency of Bridgwater. Somerset Film has been at the forefront of nurturing local talent and providing access to the creative industries since 1997. The Engine Room, located right on Bridgwater's High Street, serves as a vital community hub. It is here that young people and local residents receive training in media production from film making to digital storytelling.

This is not just about creating films; it is about creating opportunities. The charity has helped thousands of individuals from all walks of life to access hands-on training. Its training, community engagement and career development programmes are essential in making sure that the next generation of talent has the skills, knowledge and connections to succeed. Thanks to recent investments such as £500,000 of town deal funding from the previous Government, Somerset Film has been able to expand its facilities, improve equipment and reach more young people. The expansion also allows for new creative events, including public film exhibitions and more training opportunities for people in the region. All this would not be possible without the work of its creative director, Deb Richardson, and her fantastic team.

Thanks to programmes such as Screen Somerset and collaboration with organisations such as Creative England, the region has become a key player in the UK's film production network. The creative industries also have an important role in revitalising local economies, and as the film and TV sector grows, the economic benefits extend far beyond the screen. Local hotels, hospitality and service industries all see significant boosts from the influx of film production teams. In fact, the Screen Somerset project has already contributed millions to the local economy.

For all the potential, however, there is a recognition that challenges are ahead. The British Film Institute skills review this month has highlighted critical crew shortages in the UK film industry that have put stress on production schedules and workspaces. To address those gaps, the review calls for greater investment and training, and a more localised approach to production. This is where organisations such as Somerset Film play a pivotal role. As we look to the future, let us continue to support the creative industries through thoughtful investment, and ensure that those in the sector have the resources and opportunities they need to thrive.

7.54 pm

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate on an incredibly important issue. We have heard throughout the debate, not least from the Minister, about the astonishing economic impact of our creative industries, with a £125 billion contribution to our economy—almost 5% of our total economic output—and more than 2.4 million people employed in the creative industries, making up 7% of all the jobs in the UK.

Here is the challenge, however: despite these remarkable contributions, the benefits are not evenly distributed. Indeed, more than half the economic output from the creative industries in this country is concentrated in London alone. In contrast, our post-industrial heartlands—and especially their towns, such as Hartlepool—have often been overlooked in favour of places where wealth and opportunity already exist. Time and again, decisions seem to focus on the cost of everything, but the value of nothing, because it is easier to grow where the ground is already fertile, rather than investing in places where it could have the greatest impact in lifting communities, unlocking talent and transforming lives.

I believe we have an opportunity as a Government to change that narrative, with towns such as Hartlepool at the heart of the change. We have the people, and we

[Mr Jonathan Brash]

have the talent. Nothing symbolises that better than the Northern School of Art. My hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) mentioned Sir Ridley Scott, and it was at a precursor to the Northern School of Art—the West Hartlepool College of Art—that he filmed his very first movie, “Boy and Bicycle”, which was shot exclusively with Hartlepool as its background. He famously described the town as “a very visual place, a very beautiful place”, and he was not wrong.

Today the Northern School of Art operates from both its historic site and a brand-new campus, which is more than just a collection of buildings. It is a symbol of opportunity. It houses cutting-edge facilities, including sound stages for film and television production, serving both educational and commercial needs. Hartlepool is becoming a hub for education and production in the screen industries, giving students and professionals alike a place to learn, innovate and thrive. It is a vision of what is possible if we spread investment to every part of our country.

The creative industries are not confined to the traditional realms of art, film and music. Let us not forget the often overlooked but equally vital roles played by designers, planners and graphic artists. Hartlepool College of Further Education provides students with skills in the design-focused careers that are essential to every sector from technology to business and healthcare. These skills are the backbone of industries across the country, ensuring that organisations innovate and function smoothly.

Hartlepool’s creative spirit goes beyond design and the arts. It extends into areas such as health and social care. The health and social care academy at our hospital in Hartlepool is a shining example of how creative industries can drive innovation in unexpected places. During a recent visit, I was deeply impressed by its approach to scenario-based training. The ability to create safe, realistic environments for NHS and social care trainees—from handling knife crime incidents to assisting patients with physical impairments—is nothing short of inspiring. This is living proof that creative training can support vital industries and ultimately save lives.

Hartlepool is also making its mark globally through businesses such as Tanglewood Games, and I draw Members’ attention to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Tanglewood is part of a rapidly growing video game sector, creating jobs and training opportunities in an industry that is now a global economic powerhouse. With blockbuster games such as “Fortnite” and “Hogwarts Legacy”, Tanglewood Games is helping to put Hartlepool on the map, contributing to the success of some of the world’s highest-grossing games.

Looking ahead, Hartlepool’s ambitions continue to soar with plans for a production village. This initiative will not only strengthen our position in the screen industries, but complement similar projects across the north-east, creating opportunities for collaboration rather than competition. That will ensure that our region is recognised as a vital part of the UK’s creative economy, and that investment flows to where it can make the most difference.

However, these efforts and transformative investments are about more than just bricks and mortar; they are about people. They are about giving Hartlepool residents

the skills, jobs and opportunities they need to secure their futures, and they are about combining the creativity of today with the strength of our traditional industries to create a more prosperous, more resilient economy. This is the future I want to see for Hartlepool, but we must take tough actions. We should perhaps ditch the traditional orthodoxy of chasing GDP growth in favour of a longer-term project for parts of the country that have too often been left behind, investing in people, communities and creative potential, and ensuring that no one is left behind and that the UK’s creative industries continue to grow. Let us not just talk about equality and opportunity; let us act on it.

7.59 pm

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): It is a privilege to stand here to talk about our creative industries. At a time when Britain’s international influence has been waning, those industries remain a powerful testament to what we can achieve, shaping our global reputation for innovation and cultural strength. Beyond the enormous economic value of more than £100 billion contributed to our economy each year, our creative sector exerts a profound soft power that showcases British excellence, from Venice to Osaka and in every corner of the world. Much of the spending in this area is devolved, but the principle and opportunities extend UK wide. Indeed, the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) mentioned David Tennant, who started out in Scotland.

We are seeing the important role that the arts play in young people’s academic development in the move from a STEM approach, to one of science, technology, engineering and maths education also including the arts. Creative subjects foster development that enhances the learning of science and technology, producing innovation in industry as well as in the creative industries.

The hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash) mentioned how the creative industries have a broader influence in our social care sector, and I want to highlight how creative industries at the grassroots benefit our communities and reduce costs to the NHS and social care. My constituency contains numerous examples, such as the Kirkintilloch Players, the Antonine theatre group, and Creative Spark Theatre Arts. They connect young people, developing their confidence, creativity and social skills, using the power of the arts. Programmes such as the East Dunbartonshire initiative for creative therapy—EDICT—demonstrate the social benefits of arts funding, providing services to help people manage mental health challenges, and supporting those on the autism spectrum. By offering a creative outlet and constructive ways to cope, those organisations reduce the strain on our already stretched NHS and transform the lives of those who need it.

However clear the social and cultural benefits provided by our creative industries are, serious challenges persist. Since 2010, funding for local arts and culture has fallen by £2.3 billion in real terms. While the UK cut its arts and culture provision by around 6%, other OECD countries such as Germany, France and Finland increased theirs in the same period by 22%, 25%, and 70% respectively. The loss of grassroots support threatens the stability and future growth of community-based arts organisations and the wellbeing of our communities. EDICT in my community experienced a 70% funding reduction at the end of last year. As Liberal Democrats we believe in

funding the creative arts, including fine art, music, theatre, literature, film, digital and media, which are crucial to maintaining a talented skilled workforce and a healthy and vibrant economy.

8.3 pm

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): I have worked in the creative industries all my working life, from helping my father to sell radios and televisions when I was a teenager, to presenting radio shows on stations across Scotland and supporting businesses by creating content for websites. Today, I want to address the disconnect between creativity and cost, and say why we must all support the creative industries with good reviews, warm wishes, and—most importantly—with money.

How many of us use Wikipedia daily but ignore its annual appeals for donations? How many say that we value local journalism yet resent paywalls? In most areas we accept the principle of a fair day's pay for a fair day's work, but the creative industries often face a double standard, as many who wouldn't pocket a bookie's pencil think nothing of using content without the necessary permissions. Such behaviour is regrettable in individuals, but it is unforgivable in organisations. We can all do better.

For example, if local authorities can pay millions annually for software licences, why not pay a fair rate, not the minimum rate, for creative content? Teachers using streaming services in classrooms, or pupils relying on Wikipedia, could be supported by institutional subscriptions or donations that go to the people or organisations providing the content. Let the public sector lead by example, change how we value and pay for creative content, and strengthen the relationship we have with the creative sector. We should set the example and introduce the legislation that we need AI software providers to follow. In our personal lives, if someone is a podcast listener, they should not always ignore the request for that proverbial cup of coffee or an upgrade to a monthly subscription. If someone sees an article they want to read in a newspaper, they should buy the newspaper, not try to find a pal who will take a picture of it and WhatsApp it to them.

In my career I have seen creative contributions undervalued. Businesses often pay a high proportion of their budget for the technical process of building websites, but neglect the content—the very part that engages users. Too often creators hear, “I can do it myself”, when what is really needed is professional skill. We will struggle to find an artist or artisan who does not have multiple stories of offers of “exposure” or “experience” rather than money as payment for services. Exposure does not pay the bills. If someone would expect to be paid fairly for their work, they should extend the same respect to artists, artisans, writers and designers.

AI offers exciting possibilities for productivity and innovation, much like the smartphone revolution, which is now in its 17th year. AI can help creators clean up poor audio recordings or automate repetitive tasks, allowing them to focus on what they do best. However, we have seen the unintended consequences of the smartphone era, for example on mental health and social development, and we must learn from that. AI is a tool, not a replacement for human creativity, and like any tool it needs oversight and ethical guidance. It needs an instruction manual, preferably not one written by the tool itself.

Before I conclude my remarks I want to highlight a place where we can all go to be creative—a place that can sometimes struggle to be high on our agenda when we are focused on the big, the exciting or the new. I am talking about the local library. Libraries are the NHS for the soul. They are funded by our taxes, and free at the point of delivery and point of need. Libraries offer more than books; they offer a helping hand and a supportive friend, often when people need it most. Libraries improve us, enrich us, and inspire us. A library can make the difference: to a child discovering their love of reading, to an adult learning new skills, or to someone finding the support that they need to change their life. Yet many libraries today focus on surviving rather than thriving, and years of underfunding have left them struggling to provide their essential services. Not everybody has the space, the time, the skills or the hardware to engage with AI, but they will find all that help in the local library, provided by our wonderful librarians and library support staff.

In my constituency, local people are organising against the proposed closure of Auchterarder library in the coming financial year, and in Stirling the music tuition service is facing sweeping cuts. It is difficult to measure inspiration and joy, but it is easy to undervalue them. If we lose music tuition from our schools and libraries from our communities, we will lose parts of our civic soul.

The creators and the industry that supports them add colour and joy to our lives. By valuing creators, compensating them fairly and safeguarding the space and framework in which they operate, we can ensure we have a creative sector that thrives, is valued and adds value to our lives and our economy. We should start from the principle that creative output is linked to its creator and ensure that our laws reflect that, because when creativity flourishes, so does society.

8.10 pm

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): As we mark Holocaust Memorial Day and the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, it seems appropriate that we are debating the creative industries. I say that because the Holocaust was a brutal attempt by the Nazis to wipe out people and their cultures, and it is creative industries that are at the heart of growing and protecting our culture and helping wider society to thrive, rather than just survive.

What is culture? On a lighter note, was it me when I was at university many years ago, busking with an accordion in Sauchiehall Street in Glasgow? That might be stretching it a bit. Hunted Cow Studios in Elgin perhaps has a better shout. It produces a range of massively multiplayer online role-playing games, and its game graphics have included a 3D-rendered Elgin cathedral. Is it Fèis Spè or any of the other fèis across Scotland that promote Gaelic culture through poetry, music and song, particularly with primary schoolchildren and secondary schoolchildren, bringing new generations to connect with that wider culture and making the traditional artists of the future? Is it those involved in making the critically acclaimed “Outlander” TV series, which has been filmed in the heart of my constituency in the Cairngorms at Newtonmore? Is it even my wife's aunt Margaret, who is a master kiltmaker in Grantown-on-Spey?

[Graham Leadbitter]

Is it the luxury designer brand, Johnstons of Elgin, a family business that has been producing designer cashmere and tweed products for more than 200 years and employs around 650 incredibly highly skilled craftsmen and women? Could it be my tenuous link to creative genius? That is not my great-grandmother, who was a midwife in the valleys of Wales, but Richard Burton, whom she delivered.

I have not even touched on museums, touring dance groups, orchestras, Scottish Opera or amateur dramatic groups, which employ writers, set designers and sound and lighting engineers. We have music venues, from a function room above a pub to the OVO Hydro in Glasgow and Murrayfield in Edinburgh. In music, my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart) has a past life as the keyboardist in a well-known Celtic rock band, Runrig. Being a shrinking violet, he does not tell anybody about that. They were the first band to get in the UK top 40 with a song entirely in Gaelic, “An Ubhal as Àirde”. That underlines the vital links between the creative industries and a thriving society and culture.

I recently attended a book launch in Elgin by Iain MacLachlain, a local writer who has written many books and struggled to get them published, as niche writers often do, however well they write. He has written it in Scots, and traditional language publishing is even harder to do. His book has been published by the small specialist publisher Rymour, with the support of a grant from the Scottish Government to support Scots language development.

Despite all these incredible creatives, it is not all positive. Some of the most creative people create their best work in the beauty and splendour of the north of Scotland, across the highlands and islands, Moray and Aberdeenshire. Where I live, the Government’s closest priority region for funding is the Edinburgh-Dundee corridor, which is well over 100 miles and a two-and-a-half-hour drive away. That is considerably further than the distance from the constituency of the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone). The most fragile rural economies, especially those at the heart of Scotland’s Gaelic culture, run the risk of being sidelined, despite the sterling efforts with productions such as “An t-Eilean”.

Another area of concern is the BBC’s regional spend. The funding allocated to regional spend could be used to pay for production and editorial work much further away from that region. We need to be careful about that and scrutinise regional spend carefully to ensure that it is being spent in the region it is meant for.

On AI, many others in the Chamber have said things that I would have said, so I will not go deeply into the subject; I agree with pretty much everything that has been said. We have to be incredibly careful with AI. The creative industries are an economic growth success throughout these islands, so we should not try to put artificial regions or boxes around them. We should support those industries to grow and thrive wherever our creatives are living and working, and we should not tie them up in copyright changes that reduce their output and force them to chase the protection they rightly expect for their creative work.

8.15 pm

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): From murals on beachside walks to a thriving Cornish film industry, and from a town-council-owned art gallery, theatre and library, to live music, including the biggest international shanty festival in the world, during which the population of Falmouth triples, we are blessed with the creative arts in Truro and Falmouth. They are all around us, all the time, but none of that would exist and impact our lives in such a positive or poignant way were it not for education in the creative arts. The world-class Falmouth University grew out of a 100-year-old art school with a strategic focus on creativity and technology. The campus on Woodlane is historic. Alumni include visual artist Tacita Dean and British sculptor Hew Locke. It leads the world in digital games design—I thought it did, although it seems that so do Guildford and Hartlepool—as well as fashion design, film, costumes and many other things. Art is all around us in Falmouth, and we should celebrate the role it plays in our lives and our economy.

I welcome the inclusion of the creative industries among the UK’s eight growth sectors in the Government’s recent industrial strategy. It is brilliant that the creative industries are recognised for the economic driver that they are. In 2022, as many have said—it bears repeating—Britain’s creative industries generated £125 billion, which accounts for almost 6% of the UK economy and represents nearly 2.5 million jobs. They contribute more than £8 billion to the UK economy every year.

Our globally loved art scene has a huge impact on the tourism economy. One in 10 tourists to the UK visited a theatre, for example, and theatres sell 34 million tickets a year across the UK. As well as the recently beautifully renovated Hall for Cornwall and the Princess Pavilion, which is also owned by Falmouth town council, in Cornwall we have the Minack, a famous open-air theatre carved into the granite cliffs overlooking Porthcurno bay. In the summer months, it is not uncommon for the dolphins to interrupt Shakespeare.

None of those things would be possible were it not for creative arts education at school, and in higher education institutions such as Falmouth University. A creative education has many positives for students. Not only does it allow them to create, but the long-term skills gained from an arts education, such as critical thinking and problem-solving, impact on other industries, such as tech and digital media. That drives economic growth. Falmouth leads the way in AI; Engineered Arts is building increasingly complex robots by the sea, and it is trying to grow, despite the lack of industrial space in the area.

As we see in Cornwall, creative arts are a regional growth driver. Cornwall is teeming with small and medium-sized enterprises and one-man bands that stimulate the independent sector and the growth of the whole area. That can be a vital lifeline for areas that struggle with deprivation, as Cornwall does. As we see in Truro and Falmouth, creativity hubs revitalise regions, bringing in the visitors that we need so much. Take the example of the growth of the Hall for Cornwall: our theatre has spread tentacles across the rest of the Duchy, attracting would-be actors and writers who want to get involved in the creative arts, but do not often have the opportunity.

In my constituency, we have the Poly, the Princess Pavilion and brilliant grassroots venues such as the Cornish Bank, the Old Bakery Studios and the Chintz, where musicians

who are learning go to practice their art. The Minister has mentioned the venue levy; that will be vital for them. We are also building premises for a community radio station in the park with shared prosperity funding. That shows just how important the arts are to Falmouth. People come to us for the arts. However, that funding is not guaranteed and is no longer directed at plugging the gaps in local authority and national funding for arts and culture in our area.

I would love creativity to become a bigger part of the national curriculum, so that the arts have the prominent place that they should for students of all ages. STEAM—science, technology, engineering, arts and maths—puts the creativity of the arts alongside science and tech, where it belongs. Art is everywhere, but it does not come from thin air. Like all other endeavours, creative endeavours require financial support, and that funding should not be piecemeal and only urban, but must be integrated into the wider industrial strategy, and form part of a long-term regional art strategy that reaches all the way to places like Cornwall. The arts also require universal enthusiasm and long-term education. As we see in Falmouth, it is well worth the investment.

8.20 pm

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): When we talk about clusters of excellence, Wales must be at the forefront of the discussion. It is the birthplace of many famous musicians, actors and actresses, and the House can be assured that a steady flow of talent is in pipeline. I know that because last night I took my two sons to their first panto in Brecon, where we saw the Westenders' performance of "Robin Hood"—a community show, like many across the country, that brings people together as only the arts can.

Whenever I go to these shows, I notice the volunteers who sacrifice endless hours to make sure that the show goes ahead. People spend a whole month washing all the costumes that people wear during the performances. As far as I am aware, washing a whole cast's kit is something that AI cannot yet do. That is why it is so important that we listen to the people at the grassroots of our creative industries, who face similar challenges across the country.

We have heard that small towns across the UK—Brecon is certainly up there—can provide a big stage for upcoming talent. It is important to keep developing that talent pipeline. Sadly, the Welsh Government have proposed a 9% cut to the Arts Council's revenue budget for 2024-25, which would come on top of a 10.5% cut the year before, leaving the revenue budget at its lowest since 2007-08. That reduction will put further strain on an already vulnerable sector.

As we heard from the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin (Ann Davies), the creative industries are a powerful force in Wales, contributing more than 5% to our GDP and growing faster than the overall economy. With more than 35,000 people employed in the sector and a turnover of £1.5 billion in 2023-24, it is clear how vital the creative industries are to the Welsh economy. Film and television have been a massive success story. Wales is a global powerhouse in the UK's media landscape, with shows such as "Gavin & Stacey" showcasing our talent to millions; over 19 million people watched the final this Christmas. Rob Brydon and Ruth Jones, we commend you. It is time for my humblebrag: my mum went to Porthcawl comprehensive school with them both.

The time for action to improve the arts is now. I am glad that the Government are talking about their plans for a better deal for the arts across the UK. We must make sure that includes Wales. The Welsh creative industries, especially our music and arts sector, must receive the support and investment that they need to survive and thrive. Clearly, we have the talent and the potential, but we need meaningful long-term policies and investment to ensure that the sector continues to grow and flourish for future generations.

As we have heard, the creative industries are a vital growth mechanism for the rural economy. That is why I am calling for a creative enterprise zone to be established in Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe, to give a platform and all the help we can to the creative artists and musicians across my constituency.

8.24 pm

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): At the weekend, the innovation, energy and entrepreneurship of the creative community in my constituency was on full display. Off Season Margate—part of our shared commitment to developing a year-round economy—was a weekend-long, town-wide exhibition of art created by a wide range of skilled creators, initiated by the award-winning artist Lindsey Mendick. From oil paints to embroidery, sculpture to ceramics and photography to screen prints, a whole range of skills were on display in the form of incredible art.

This was a democratic exercise in the power of creativity, involving world-renowned artist Tracey Emin and raw artists—people displaying their work in front rooms and cafés, as well as galleries, telling their stories, and reflecting their experience of the world through art. The weather played its part, because the sun was shining. Margate was buzzing. It was a clear demonstration of my three key arguments today: first, creativity is valuable not just because it is enjoyed by the consumers, but because it benefits the creators. They must be appreciated. Secondly, the creative industries have a crucial role to play in revitalising our coastal communities, where so many creatives choose to live. Thirdly, if this fundamental element of our society and economy is to thrive, we must develop the pipeline—the next generation of artists—by enshrining creativity in our national curriculum.

However, if we think of creativity simply as an industry, we lose something that makes it special. Creativity is fundamental to the human condition. It is woven into our daily lives and our history. The first example of civilisation is carvings on the walls of caves. Those people chose to record the world around them. They chose to leave a mark. They expressed themselves and the lives they lived. The need to express ourselves flows through human history and exists in every single one of us, but the ability to tap into it is artificially limited by an inequality of access to the arts. That is a failure of previous Governments, and because of it, we have fewer skilled creators and less well-rounded individuals, and society is depleted.

Talent is found everywhere in our country, but as so many hon. Members have pointed out, opportunity is not. If we do not allow every child the right to an arts education, we will miss out on the next Tracey Emin or Bob and Roberta Smith. The damage done to creative education by the introduction of the English baccalaureate and Progress 8, which led to a dramatic fall in the number of students taking up arts-based subjects, must

[Ms Polly Billington]

be reversed at the earliest opportunity. I support that campaign, alongside Members from across the House who share my concern about the impact of those changes on our children, our society and our economy. How can we expect the creative industries to come anywhere close to their potential when the education system is actively dissuading children from studying creative subjects? Every arts subject is important, and every child deserves an arts education. As my badge from the Royal Academy of Arts says,

“Art is a serious subject.”

Art is never more serious than for children with special educational needs, for whom creative education is a vital tool allowing them to access learning and live their fullest lives. Sammy’s Foundation was set up by my constituent Patricia Alban after the tragic death of her son. Sammy had a rare genetic disease and autism and was unable to attend mainstream schools, but he found his passion and skill in craft. The foundation now helps other children with disabilities to learn heritage crafts as a way of uncovering their talents and to lead meaningful, connected lives with a sense of purpose. Considering we have a huge skills gap in our heritage crafts sector, it feels to me that it is a win-win to invest in arts education that harnesses the aptitudes of neurodivergent children, preparing them for purposeful and rewarding work creating beautiful things and contributing to the economy, rather than seeing them as a problem to be managed.

As well as inequality of access to the arts, there is inequality of reward. According to research from the University of Glasgow, the median income for visual artists is £12,500 a year—a 40% decrease in earnings since 2010. That is almost 50% lower than the income of a full-time minimum wage worker. On top of that, one in three creative industry workers is freelance.

When discussing the rise of AI and the challenges it poses for artists, my constituents are far from the luddites that some would like to dismiss them as. Polling from the Design and Artists Copyright Society shows that 84% of artists would agree to license their work for AI training so long as they received fair pay for it. However, they know that the fundamental act of creation is something that will always differentiate that which a machine has learned from what a human has made. Their right to have that work protected, and their freedom to engage with AI on their terms, is something on which I and many others will continue to seek reassurances from the Government.

This is not about resisting change; it is about bringing in change in a fair and equitable way. This is already a sector with low pay and a lack of security. If we do not put in proper safeguards, we will end up making jobs in this sector even more unappealing for those whose passion is to work in it. Data from the Creators’ Rights Alliance shows that 30% of photographers have already lost clients due to generative AI, while 26% of illustrators and 36% of translators have reported losing work. Two thirds of writers believe generative AI will cost them future earnings. We cannot afford to lose the ideas and imagination of these people—they are the people building the amazing heritage of Thanet, to shape an economy that thrives all year round and creates a pipeline of art and skilled creatives for the whole country. They also project our soft power into the world.

The benefits of investment in the creative sector in coastal communities is demonstrated by the Turner Contemporary in my constituency, which has contributed to a lively ecosystem around the visual arts, among many other things—all without a university to support it. I look forward to there being a coastal dimension to the creative industrial strategy that can engender similar vibrancy and sustain such initiatives for the long term.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I, too, represent a coastal seat, and I, too, know how coastal seats have been forgotten as part of the national story about our creativity. Bournemouth is the resting place of Mary Shelley and was home to Robert Louis Stevenson, and it is also home to many institutions such as Bournemouth University, the Arts University Bournemouth, the Russell-Cotes art museum and gallery and the Boscombe Arts Depot. The list could really go on—but I will not go on. Does my hon. Friend agree that coastal communities such as ours, which have voted Labour for the first time in a very long time—perhaps even for the first time—need their Labour Government to focus on their creative possibilities and to support the jobs and skills of the future?

Ms Billington: Coastal communities across the country are often places people escape to in order to find a place where they can really thrive. That is why coastal areas will be so important in developing a proper creative industry strategy.

East Thanet has long been an engine room for our country’s creative industries. If its future is to be as glorious as its past, and if we are to continue to use our soft power globally through our internationally famous artists and creators, creativity needs to be valued in and of itself. Creators need to be able to create with dignity and security, and all generations should be able to access art education to enhance their lives and society as a whole.

8.33 pm

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): I am late in the debate, and we have a bit of a time limit already, so I will struggle to make all the points I would like to make. I will write to the Minister with any I fail to make—I think he knows what I will be chasing him up on.

I want to follow the hon. Members for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) and for Bury North (Mr Frith) in being a little philosophical with my points today. I believe that participation and enjoyment of the arts is a human right, as article 27 of the universal declaration of human rights says. It forms part of our post-Holocaust legacy of putting together a strong framework to recognise and protect the purpose and value of humanity after we saw just how bad things can get. As a Green, I spend a lot of time working hard to ensure the continuation of our ecological and physical environment which is necessary for our civilisation, but the reasons for our civilisation are just as much what gets me out of bed in the morning to come and do this job. I would argue for the arts and creativity, regardless of their impact on our GDP, any day of the week.

Last week, I had the very great honour of speaking at the Music Venue Trust’s annual report launch here on the parliamentary estate. I was absolutely delighted to do so because my constituency is home to so many

amazing grassroots music and performance venues. We have the Green Door Store, Alphabet, Rossi Bar, the Prince Albert, Hope and Ruin, the Folklore Rooms, Komedia—I could go on and on. Since I was elected, I have been shocked at the amount of work venues and their allies still have to do to fight off damaging developments. In 2023, as other Members have mentioned, the Music Venue Trust reported that we lost 125 trading grassroots music venues. That trend has now reduced, but it is still not zero. The Music Venue Trust's emergency response service—it has a huge caseload, with more than 200 cases last year—has a very good success rate in fighting off terrible planning applications, but it does so alongside music venues that are putting a lot of time and effort into that work. We are still seeing far too many appeals taken forward, some of which are successful.

I recognise that the adoption of the agent of change principle guidance in the NPPF has made a difference, but we need to go further. What remains to be done is to put the agent of change principle into a statutory framework. I raised that in this House with the Minister in November. As well as being excited that the Secretary of State and Ed Sheeran had a chat last week, the Minister told me that that chat involved talking about that precise issue. I have chased it up since, but I am still looking for a timetable, so I hope the Minister can today provide more details.

It is not just music that is fantastic in Brighton and Hove. We have a huge number of artisans, artists, makers, designers, restorers and creative businesses too. They depend on an infrastructure of studios, workshops and gallery spaces to not only make their work, but to show it and sell it to Brighton Pavilion residents and visitors alike. Those spaces are facing threats, including the need for refurbishment. The amazing Phoenix Art Space needs to refurbish. It is looking for space to move into and expand into later, but it is really struggling to find it. New England House, the first ever high-rise industrial business centre, is a light industrial space that many makers use. It needs urgent fire safety work. People are facing either refurbishment over an incredibly long time or possibly moving out in the meantime. We need the Government to support those kinds of venues.

My constituency is also packed full of inspiring theatre, comedy, dance and cabaret, and people working as writers and in media production and digital creativity. Many of those creatives have written to me with their serious concerns about the Government's consultation on AI and copyright. I was pleased that the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart) mentioned the Digital Economy Act. Although not in this place, I was a campaigner on those issues at that time. In my last minute, I want to reflect very briefly on whether we as a society failed at that time, in those debates on digital impacts on creativity and copyright, to look at copyright terms—the amount of time for which copyright extends. It is very, very long, and we find now that copyright is being held in many older works not by the original creators but by rights holders.

I wrote something for a national magazine which, ironically, is now behind a paywall, so I cannot see exactly what I wrote, but I remember that I suggested that a copyright term of 10 or 20 years might be reasonable so that the young man who sat down and wrote “Yesterday” yesterday is protected for a reasonable period. Then we could start to build up public domain works and provide

useful AI tools to train in ways that do not rip off creators. If we had thought about that earlier, there would probably be a simpler answer to the knotty question with which Ministers are grappling today.

I welcome the debate, and hope that we can continue to discuss this subject in the interesting way in which Members have discussed it today—Members who are genuine experts in their fields, and genuinely creative as well. However, it worries me that we are facing a bit of a watershed whereby today's creators will not be rewarded, and we may get the law very slightly wrong once again when we look at the interaction of the modern world with the oldest part of our civilisation that exists, which is art.

8.40 pm

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I should begin by declaring an interest: my constituency office is in the Queen's Hall community arts centre, so I can not only speak about the impact of the creative economy locally, but recommend the cheese scones.

Representing, as I do, a large and sprawling rural constituency, I am frequently reminded of the value of our creative economy—not just in the arts clubs in places such as Corbridge and Haltwhistle or centres such as Allendale Forge Studios, but in the community facilities that they provide and the community spirit that they foster, and in the events put on by organisations such as Throckley Community Hall. All those play a fundamental role in building up our local communities and supporting our local creative economy, but they also support the wider economies. For instance, they support our local hospitality businesses. The Queen's Hall hosts some of the large acts at the Hexham book festival—the now Health Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), came to plug his own book during the last general election campaign, and went down very well on the doorsteps of Elvaston—and such events provide a massive boost for our local shops and cafés, as well as putting towns such as Hexham and the Tyne valley on the map.

When I speak to young people in my constituency, they often say that they want to pursue a career in the creative economy. It concerns me that what holds them back is not just a lack of access to a specialised education, but a lack of access to the infrastructure that would offer them some job opportunities. As we are coming up to the watershed, I should say that the Tyne Valley line is often subject to some creative language from my constituents owing to the delays. I arrived late for this debate, and had not been sure that I would make it because of those delays. Ensuring that our constituents have access to job and education opportunities and experiences should be at the heart of the Government's policy, and I urge the Minister, as he speaks to colleagues, to ensure that we look not just at the outputs of the creative economy but at the inputs, and at what those young people can get out of it.

I am also privileged to represent some of the most stunning landscapes in England, including Hadrian's Wall and the much-missed Sycamore Gap. At present, people will be hard pressed to visit a community arts fair in Northumberland without pictures of the Sycamore Gap being thrust at them from all corners. It is a tremendous loss, and I only hope that its frequent presence on screen, in documentaries and other films,

[Joe Morris]

will lead to more tourists coming to Northumberland and more investment in the creative arts in our area. Once “Vera” stops running, we shall need another series to step in and take its place. Once when I was being interviewed, someone thought that there had been a flash-forward episode in the market square, which scared me no end.

As we consider what the creative economy can do for not just our urban centres but our more rural constituencies, let me urge the Minister to consider the investments in infrastructure that could be fundamental to giving young people access to the highly paid, high-skill jobs that they need. I have badgered him about broadband connectivity before, in Westminster Hall, but those jobs do not necessarily have to be based in the urban centres; they can be based in the Hexhams, the Riding Mills and the Stocksfields of the world. If there is one thing that I like to speak about in this place more than anything, it is the need for younger people to be able to live where they grew up, should they wish to do so. It is a tremendous privilege to be the MP for where I grew up, but sadly on the street I am much more likely to bump into not those I grew up with, but their parents or grandparents.

As I finish, I return to the community halls, community theatres, parish halls and church halls. Those community assets are usually the places where I hold my surgeries. They define our communities, and they are the first to step up during major crises and major events that require the community to come together. In a rural environment, the creative industry is not just an industry; it is about the entirety of the community and what defines Northumberland and the north-east.

8.45 pm

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): The creative industries undoubtedly make a significant contribution to our economy, but they are about much more than that. They make a broad and deep contribution to who we are, to our culture and to our nation. When it comes to economic contribution, in Northern Ireland we have a thriving creative industry in a number of spheres. Under the guidance of Northern Ireland Screen, which has as its honorary president the redoubtable Sir Kenneth Branagh, we have seen significant success in the screen industry and many successful productions, none more so than “Game of Thrones”. Happily, quite a bit of it was filmed in my constituency of North Antrim, at the famous dark hedges—where, sadly, on Friday we lost four of the large trees in the storm—and at Ballintoy harbour, among other places.

We are appreciative of that economic contribution, which does not end with the creative industries but creates, in the very names I mentioned, an advantageous spin-off in tourism. Many tourists come to North Antrim to see the dark hedges, and many tourists visit various filming locations. We are happy to have had that benefit in Northern Ireland. Of course, we also have the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is, in a manner of speaking, a creative industry in himself. There is no more creative Member of this House when it comes to finding an intervention in each and every debate.

Chris Bryant: Intervene—go on!

Jim Allister: He is suddenly silent, thankfully.

That is all very good, but the thrust of what I want to say relates to a niche sector of the creative industries: the craft sector as it applies in Northern Ireland. The sector is often made up of one-man or one-person operations, or those involving a couple of people, but cumulatively it is quite important. However, in Northern Ireland it has had a huge and debilitating problem in recent months. Historically, it has, unsurprisingly, secured much of its raw materials from Great Britain, but because Northern Ireland was left behind in the EU single market, we are now subject to the general product safety regulation. Under that regulation, there are inhibitions on imports of the raw materials and goods necessary for the craft industry, as well as others. Bigger sectors can more easily withstand that, but smaller sectors cannot.

What is happening is that suppliers in GB are simply stopping supplying, because the bureaucracy of the GPSR is such that a business cannot supply into the EU market—and therefore, sadly, into a part of the United Kingdom, namely Northern Ireland—unless it has a person living within that perceived EU territory who is its “responsible person”. A business in Great Britain that wants to supply basic elements into the craft sector or some other sector in Northern Ireland has to pay to have someone in place in Northern Ireland. More than that, among the other requirements of the GPSR, that seller from GB needs to put labels on every product with the contact information of the responsible person and the contact information of the manufacturer—this is all about the internal market of our own country—and the responsible person’s name and contact details, including their postal and electronic addresses, need to be displayed in online listings. With that burden on suppliers, it is no surprise that, where the market for the product is small, they simply say, “It’s not worth the effort. We will stop supplying.” The loser in that is the Northern Ireland craft sector.

It has got to the ridiculous stage where some online retailers, such as Folksy, advise sellers that

“the UK now excludes Northern Ireland”.

That is a quote—the United Kingdom “now excludes Northern Ireland”. “Europe,” it says,

“has become EU & Northern Ireland”.

Amazon states on its seller website that “from December 13, 2024”—that is when the regulation came in—

“Responsible Person requirements will apply to most non-food consumer products offered for sale in the EU and Northern Ireland, under the...GPSR”,

and it tells its GB sellers that they must meet all the requirements I have just cited, including the labels saying who the responsible person is, how they can be contacted, who the product came from, and so on.

Unsurprisingly, that is crippling the craft market in Northern Ireland. Bizarrely, it has got to the point where we are told that it includes digital downloads. A lady called Alison Evans, who runs Zanycraftsuk, has been told that even digital downloads of knitting patterns are covered by the new regulations of the Irish sea border. Think of it: the EU single market is so fragile that it cannot withstand the downloading of a knitting pattern from Doncaster to Downpatrick. How ridiculous is that? Yet that is where we are with these regulations. The Minister told us that this Government would bulldoze barriers. Well, here

is a barrier for him to bulldoze with all his might, in protection of the craft sector and other sectors in Northern Ireland.

That takes me to the AI controversy. *[Interruption.]* I will be very quick. I share many of the concerns, but I want to make this point clear to the House. The Government have said that they are going to be adventurous on AI, but not for Northern Ireland, because Northern Ireland is going to be subject to the EU's regulations of AI, which are much more restrictive. So once more, divergence is leaving us behind and a separate regime is going to be the order of the day. That is another to barrier to bulldoze, Minister.

8.54 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Here's to a vibrant performance art sector in every community across the UK. Whether we are talking about school plays, choirs or theatre, in pubs, nightclubs or concert halls, the opportunities that they provide for enjoyment and life-enriching moments cannot be underestimated, and they must be valued and supported. I will give some examples of the successes and challenges in my constituency of Bath, and they will be mirrored in other towns and cities. I hope this debate will help to make the case for more Government funding of the performing arts, a sector where more is needed.

The creative world is very diverse. Many organisations have always existed entirely within the private sector. Others are supported locally by council funding or nationally by the Arts Council. Patrons and sponsors have always existed in this space, but for the last decade they have been expected to replace public funding almost entirely. In Bath, this has narrowed the offer and put enormous strain on organisers to balance the books. The finances of far too many organisations have become hand to mouth. Even in Bath, with its strong network of patrons and supporters of the creative industries, the pressure to balance the books and keep the show on the road makes for a long hard struggle.

According to the Campaign for the Arts, DCMS core funding of arts and cultural organisations has fallen by 18% since 2010. Equity's analysis shows a 16% real-terms cuts in funding by arts councils nationwide, and that is further compounded by nearly £1 billion of cuts to arts and culture funding by local government across the UK. A decade ago, the big events in Bath received core funding from the council and sometimes the Arts Council, but no more. What is the result? Moles, the famous performance space for emerging talent in the centre of Bath, has closed, and despite the best efforts of local campaigners and the new Music Venue Trust, it is unlikely to open again.

The Bath Festival has amalgamated its musical and literary festivals into one and tries to de-risk its musical offer, but each year it gets harder. The Mission theatre successfully turned its buildings into a community asset and hopes to separate the finances of the building from all the experimental and small performances that take place in it, but each time the roof leaks or a window needs replacing, it entirely depends on local donors. The Bath Philharmonia came to Parliament to highlight the work it does with young carers, but none of that could happen without long-term financial backing. These are just some examples of the great efforts made by the

creatives in Bath. Some will come through, but others will not survive the retirement of one or two key people or the loss of core funding. How can trusts and patrons be expected to keep these events and community venues alive single-handedly with so little Government support?

The Secretary of State's recent announcement of £60 million for the creative industries is welcome, but it will do little to reverse the deep cuts of the last two decades. More importantly, funding must not be provided on a piece-by-piece basis. I reiterate what the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) said on this earlier. It should be devised as part of wider industrial strategy integrated with the reform of Arts Council England and a coherent and long-term growth strategy for regional arts. The Resolution Foundation's state-of-the-nation report, "Ending Stagnation," argues that the creative industries are a "rising British strength" that should form one part of

"the bedrock for a growth strategy".

Theatres, for example, make a significant contribution to local economies. For every £1 spent on theatre, another £1.40 is generated in the local economy. If the Government are focused on growth, the creative industries should be at the core of their strategy.

I reiterate what my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) has already said: the UK now spends only 0.2% of GDP on arts and culture, compared with a European average of 0.5%. That puts us among the lowest public expenditure on arts and culture in Europe.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): I know my hon. Friend has been to the cultural mecca of Taunton in Somerset, so will she credit the town council? She talks about long-term funding, and Taunton town council is putting £300,000 of funding into the arts over three years, including for the amazing Gaumont project to restore the Mecca bingo hall as a theatre.

Wera Hobhouse: I congratulate Taunton town council on putting that money into the arts. That is absolutely what is needed, but many councils struggle to balance the books and have to make very difficult decisions.

To deliver on the full potential of the UK's competitive advantage in the arts and entertainment, additional public investment is required. We need to understand why we are so far behind the rest of Europe in terms of funding and take urgent action to correct that. Core funding is key to the resurgence of Bath's creative sector, and of creative industries across the country. I hope this new Government can turn the page on the constant cuts to our creative industries and ensure that every community has a vibrant creative sector for all to enjoy.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Jim Shannon.

9.1 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was expecting to be tail-end Charlie again.

The creative industry has many facets from practical to digital and, as I mentioned in my intervention on the Minister, Northern Ireland excels in all of them. The Minister kindly responded in a very positive fashion,

[Jim Shannon]

realising that each region of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland contributes to the creative industry.

My Strangford constituents are incredibly gifted, including those who carved the lion, the witch and the wardrobe into the trail at Rostrevor. The hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) mentioned his favourite film, “Paddington 2”. Well, Ards and North Down borough council has a statue of Paddington sitting on a bench and eating a sandwich in Conway Square, Newtownards, and people come from all over the place to take photographs, including me with my grandchildren. It has become one of the many tourist attractions in Strangford. It is a new one; Paddington has been instrumental in that.

From those encouraging nature walks, family time and tourism to the home crafters who sell through Etsy—or should I say used to sell through Etsy—the insidious Northern Ireland protocol has curtailed supplies to the extent that many of these small creative workers are trying to throw in the towel, but they cannot even source the material to make the towel. The hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) is right to make that point. I will not dwell on it, but I wanted to put it on the record. From those who upcycle defunct trombones into beautiful lamps to those who bake and sell their wares UK-wide through TikTok, the creative industry has the ability to thrive, yet it is being curtailed. Although I understand that this is not a debate on the damage done by the protocol, the protocol is intrinsically linked to the creative industry in Northern Ireland. Again, will the Minister please discuss this with the Cabinet and repeat the point raised by the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim, which I have also made to a lesser extent?

Before the full extent of the postal implications of the protocol came into force, our creative industry in Northern Ireland was going from strength to strength. The creative industry employs over 5% of the entire workforce and contributes nearly £1 billion of gross value added. The Department for Communities estimates that to be 29,000 jobs, or 3.4% of total employment in Northern Ireland. This is not a niche sector. It is a real sector that deserves real support.

The Minister should be greatly encouraged—as I am, and we all should be—by each Member who has spoken about the culture and creative industry in their constituency. When we add together the massive wealth of creative industry across each and every constituency, it augurs well for the future.

New and emergent technologies are a fast-growing market, and incorporating them into the creation and delivery of arts experiences can open up valuable new ways of generating income for arts organisations and individuals. Film NI and the promotion of film opportunities have grown massively, and we now see blockbusters filmed on our shores, which lifts and encourages us all. The hon. and learned Member for North Antrim referred to the film sector, which is represented in my constituency as well.

Movie and screen productions filmed in Northern Ireland directly boosted the local economy by £330 million between 2018 and 2022. That period includes the covid years, which means the potential is even greater. The Minister

referred to the comedy programme “Derry Girls”, which every one of us loves. It does not matter if people are Unionists or nationalists; humour is the same, whichever side it comes from. I know my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) is particularly enthralled by “Derry Girls” and he is of a very, very different tradition.

I have focused on the great jobs that are being done within our creative industries, but the purpose of the debate is to ensure that we retain the facility and ability to produce. Concerns have been highlighted to me that the talented people who make up our world-class creative industries, such as publishing, music and visual arts, will have to go to great lengths to opt out of their work being used to train the AI models. We must set our minds to that issue. In response to earlier queries, the Minister referred to how that will be done, so I am keen to hear from him just what that means. It has been said that the system is hugely burdensome and unworkable, especially for smaller rights holders. In companies with few employees, the opt-out system will create new costs and administrative burdens that will not be feasible for a great many in our creative sectors. We cannot lose that sector because of issues that could be stopped and changed.

The proposed exception would also jeopardise future potential growth in the UK’s world-leading creative sector, disincentivise the creation of new works, and weaken the property rights of creators and businesses of all sizes across the UK. We need truly to celebrate our creative industries. To do that, we must protect the current copyright framework—that is the big ask for the Minister, from me and many others.

In conclusion—I am conscious of time—our creative industries, both practically and digitally, need protection. We must prioritise that enterprise when we are considering innovation, so I look to the Minister to do that. He is enthusiastic and wants us to succeed, and I think we want to support him and help him to make that happen, so how can we protect and enhance this sector, which has so much potential?

9.7 pm

Liz Jarvis (Eastleigh) (LD): I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak in the debate, not least because I spent many years working in publishing before I came to this place. I have the honour of serving on the Culture, Media and Sport Committee and I am a former ambassador for Xbox, which is possibly the only time my son thought I was cool.

Recently, I visited Barton Peveril, a consistently successful local sixth-form college in my constituency, where many students have a keen interest in the creative industries. For all those students and the thousands of young people across the UK who want to pursue careers in film, music, video games, TV, fashion, architecture, design and, of course, publishing, it is vital that those sectors are supported. Yet over the past 14 years, there has been a 47% drop in students taking arts-related GCSEs and a 29% decline at A-level. Universities are also slashing creative courses; at least 14 institutions are cutting arts funding or merging departments. That is hugely concerning. Arts education fosters ingenuity, critical thinking and innovation, which are skills that benefit all industries. We must protect arts education and funding.

For those talented performers who want to share their work, Brexit red tape continues to make it unnecessarily difficult for performers and artists to tour in Europe. The complex visa and permit requirements stifle opportunities for British talent to showcase their work abroad, and independent musicians are among those hardest hit. Touring has become increasingly hard because of the mountain of bureaucracy now involved. Musicians face navigating different visa rules for each EU country and financial burdens that make tours unviable for many. I sincerely hope that will be addressed.

As we have heard, AI poses a growing threat, and Sir Paul McCartney and Sir Elton John are right to have concerns about that issue. While AI offers exciting opportunities, it must not come at the expense of our talent. Recent reports that *The Guardian* used AI to produce stories during industrial action are concerning. Can the Minister outline what steps the Government will take to ensure that AI serves and enhances the creative industries, rather than undermines them? The Association for UK Interactive Entertainment has highlighted the need for better support to ensure that the gaming industry, which is growing rapidly, can continue to thrive. Sector-wide job losses and the rise of AI replacing creative roles are putting studios under immense pressure. As a global leader in video game creation, it is vital that we protect this sector.

To ensure that Britain remains a global leader in creativity, we need continued safeguarding of copyright, investment in arts education, and more support for grassroots venues. We should be proud of our creative industries, so let us work together to ensure that they continue to be world class. I hope that the Government will provide the ambition, investment and vision needed to ensure that the creative industries continue to thrive.

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

9.10 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): It is a privilege to wind up the debate on behalf of His Majesty's Official Opposition. There have been impressive contributions from across the House, and many Members have highlighted how their constituencies deliver for the UK's creative industries. We heard from the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler), who participated in a punk rock band—the last one to perform at The Roxy, he said, although I think the jury is out on that. We also heard from the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Frith), who I believe performed at Glastonbury. I do not think he talks about that enough; he should do so more in the future.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) highlighted the places that made him the man he is today. My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson) secured a meeting for not just himself but his Labour colleague, the hon. Member for Isle of Wight West (Mr Quigley)—a great example of cross-party working. My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox) made a very serious point about the impact of the Budget on the creative industries. The Chair of the DCMS Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinéage), gave a tour of the power of the creative industries across the country. She is doing an excellent job of holding the Government to account.

As we have heard, the UK's creative sectors are world-leading. They provide opportunities for young people up and down the country to gain employment and skills that can transform their lives. I welcome the fact that so many Members across the House recognise the potential of the creative industries to grow the economy. The UK's creative industries are truly formidable. In both cultural and economic terms, they are absolute titans. In 2023 alone, it is estimated that the creative industries contributed around £124 billion to the UK economy—in other words, about 5% of our overall economic output. There has been a steady rise in the value of the creative industries to the UK, from accounting for 4.7% of economic output in 2010 to over 5.2% in 2023. It is important that we in this place recognise their growing importance in economic terms.

Our creative industries are also immense in terms of jobs. Around 2.4 million people work in the sector, which totals around 7.1% of all UK jobs. Although the creative industries are still quite heavily London-based, we see diversification of the sector and clusters of creative industry right across the UK, from the leading video game development hubs in Stoke-on-Trent to the beating heart of Northern Ireland, where the creative industries sector employs 29,000 people. Huge swathes of the UK benefit from our creative industries. I know that at first hand, as a west midlands MP. The remarkable director Steven Knight, who created “*Peaky Blinders*”, runs an incredible project in Birmingham where he recruits 20% of people from the most deprived neighbourhoods. Steven's record shows that we must continue to champion our creative industries sector, because it has real potential to drive social mobility and generate economic growth. As “*Peaky Blinders*” is a huge international success, our creative industries ensure that Brand Britain rules on the international stage.

We cannot measure the value and importance of our creative industries just in economic terms, because their reach is impossible to estimate truly. Government statistics show that between July and September 2023 there were 12.5 million visits to DCMS-sponsored museums and galleries. Given the Government's desire to ensure that 50 million people come to the UK each year, allowing these cultural hubs to thrive will bring more people to the UK to visit some of our great cultural attractions. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew) set out, the Conservatives have a proud record of supporting the creative industries. Between 2010 and 2022, the creative industries grew at more than double the rate of UK gross value added, expanding by over 50%. During that period, over one million new jobs were created in the sector. Rather than burdening the creative industries with tax hikes, we introduced over £1 billion of tax reliefs, including the UK independent film tax credit and business rates relief for theatres and cultural venues.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon set out, during the pandemic we introduced unprecedented support for the creative industries, including the £1.57 billion culture recovery fund, the £500 million film and TV production restart scheme and the £800 million live events reinsurance scheme. That support protected over 5,000 organisations and safeguarded 220,000 jobs, ensuring that our creative industries could bounce back and continue to offer opportunities for young people.

[Saqib Bhatti]

As we have heard, our ambition did not end there. In government, the Conservatives published a sector vision setting out our plan to grow the creative industries by £50 billion and create one million new jobs. These were jobs for young designers, artists, writers, creatives and others who wanted to bring joy, inspiration and opportunities to the lives of others. In this debate, the Government claimed to have similar aspirations for the creative industries and the young people eager to build careers in them, but we know that is simply not true.

Labour Members have spoken warmly about the creative industries, their impact on the economy and the many opportunities that they bring to young people, but the Government's actions speak louder than their words. The Government know that one in eight young people are not in education, employment or training, and that many lack the essential skills and confidence to progress in work. How did Labour rise to that challenge? It scrapped the National Citizen Service.

The NCS, introduced by the previous Government, was designed to support young people during a crucial time in their life, connecting them to peers from many walks of life. It gave them opportunities to build their skills and confidence, and empowered them to make a difference in their communities. Having delivered over a million experiences to young people, who took part in over 18 million hours of volunteering, the NCS made a real difference. Does the Minister recognise that Labour's decision to scrap the NCS will mean that fewer young people take up the opportunities presented by the creative sectors? UK Youth has warned that scrapping the National Citizen Service and the youth investment fund, along with other cuts, could lead to a net reduction in central Government funding for youth services in 2025-26, possibly by tens of millions of pounds. That will inevitably hurt the creative sector.

Many Labour Members spoke warmly about the creative sector, but their Government are doing irreparable harm to its industries. The truth is that the Chancellor's Budget of broken promises raised taxes to the highest level ever and introduced a national insurance jobs tax. Labour slashed retail, hospitality and leisure relief. There is nothing to protect the creative industries from the Deputy Prime Minister's radical Employment Rights Bill—an ill-thought-through piece of legislation that will bolster the power of the trade unions and take the country back to the 1970s.

Gareth Snell: The hon. Gentleman's point about the trade unions is absolute nonsense, but that aside, he was first elected in 2019. He is on record as publicly supporting former Prime Minister Liz Truss and, according to *Hansard*, voted for the health and social care levy, which was a larger increase in national insurance across a much broader spectrum. At no point did he raise concerns about the creative industry then, so would he like to take this opportunity to apologise for that, or is this just naked political point scoring?

Saqib Bhatti: The hon. Member makes an interesting point. I can see the Whip furiously making notes: "Give the man a job." He was reading that off the Whip's handout, and that is all I will say.

Our creative industry sector, and especially the young people within it, will pay the price of the Chancellor's growth-killing Budget and the Deputy Prime Minister's radical Employment Rights Bill. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has warned that Labour's national insurance jobs tax could lead to fewer opportunities. The sad truth is that under this Labour Government, many businesses in the creative sector will not survive. Don't just take it from me; take it from Sir Nicholas Hytner, the former artistic director of the National Theatre, who warned that Labour's jobs tax will force businesses to close, or from UK Theatre, which warned that 40% of venues could close in the next five years due to Labour's autumn Budget. The inevitable truth is that this Labour Government are a threat to the entire creative industry sector.

But it is not just the Government's rampant socialism that poses a huge threat to the creative industries. [Interruption.] I am glad Government Members are cheering the demise of the creative sector; people in them will be listening. Alongside the catastrophic impact of Labour's increase in national insurance, there is the Government's copyright and AI consultation, which is causing deep concern for the creative industries, but also for many Labour Members. The Minister's preference for a data mining opt-out for the creative industries will place extra burdens on creators, who are rightly concerned that their work is under threat. My hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) and many others made a compelling argument about how damaging the Government's proposal is.

Given the magnitude of the potential changes to copyright and AI, one would think that the Minister would have allocated significant time for creative industry sectors to raise their views. Instead, during the Christmas break, he rolled out a consultation that finishes just next month. He left the creative industries scrambling to raise their concerns with a Government who refuse to listen.

The Minister also works in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, so can he tell me why, as my hon. Friend for Gosport mentioned, the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology has refused to meet representatives from the creative sector? I have heard myself just how worried, angry and frustrated the creative industry sector is about this proposal. Does the Minister have any idea about its impact? Has he considered having a full and transparent impact assessment to properly understand how the sector will be harmed by these changes? My right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon put forward some really important points and challenges, and I look forward to hearing the answers to those.

In our last exchange at the Dispatch Box, I asked the Secretary of State questions about her national youth strategy, but my questions remain unanswered. I hope that the Minister, in his closing statement, can address the serious concerns we have raised about Labour's Budget of broken promises and its radical Employment Rights Bill, as well as the serious issues we have highlighted around the Government's AI and copyright consultation.

I repeat, slightly changed, the question I asked Secretary of State at the Dispatch Box less than two weeks ago: can the Minister guarantee that the Chancellor, in a desperate attempt to save her job, will not balance the books by putting the burden on the back of our creative

industry sector? When I asked the Secretary of State that question, she said that it was tired. Well, I can tell the Minister that Conservative Members will not tire of standing up for our young people; we will not tire of standing up for our creative sectors; and we will not tire of holding the Government to account.

9.21 pm

Chris Bryant: Siri, show me an example of political hyperbole. Madam Deputy Speaker, I am terribly sorry, but it is me again—I am winding up the debate tonight. It was a really good debate, and it was going exceedingly well, as Mr Kipling would say, until the last few moments. Given all the demonstrations of talent that we have had from around the Chamber, I feel that we should put on a show. In fact, I gather that while we have been debating these issues, Mr Speaker has appeared on television in the 10,000th episode of “Emmerdale”, so we are a talented House.

As I think everybody has said, the creative industries have enormous economic importance. If any Members have not yet seen the “Starring GREAT Britain” campaign, which we launched in the last few days for our tourism, I really hope that they will google it and have a watch—but not during the debate, obviously. It is hilarious and very clever. It is all about trying to get tourists, because somewhere between 60% and 70% of international visitors to this country want to see places where films and TV were made.

As has been mentioned many times, the creative industries have massive social importance. They are about shared experiences, walking in other people’s shoes, and having empathy for those with a different meaning of life. So many Members referred to the personal importance of discovering ourselves and discovering confidence. Several Members referred to young people who have never had the opportunity for proper creative education, and who find it difficult to have confidence going into any line of work.

We have also heard quite a lot about the interconnectedness of all the different aspects of the creative industries. I went to a play last night at the King’s Head theatre in Islington called “Firebird”. It is based on a film that is based on a book. The Royal Shakespeare Company’s new video game, *Lili*, is based on Shakespeare’s play “Macbeth”. No film is made without costumes, design, make-up, hair and all the rest of it, and no industry in this country would last without design or marketing. It is a simple fact that the creative industries are woven into every part of our British economy. If I might steal a moment from the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin (Ann Davies), she is quite right—the poem is a good one:

“To be born in Wales, not with a silver spoon in your mouth, but with music in your blood and with poetry in your soul, is a privilege indeed.”

I sort of agree, but it should not be a privilege. Songs, poems, books, plays, films and television stories—all those things are part of our birthright as British people. We should never sell that birthright for a mess of pottage, to quote the Old Testament. I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) that we should always be on the side of the humans.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD) *rose*—

David Chadwick *rose*—

Chris Bryant: I have two Liberal Democrats wanting to intervene. It is very difficult to decide between them. I will give way to the one who has not taken part.

Clive Jones: Shinfield studios, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang), has created jobs for many people in my constituency of Wokingham and has been singled out in the *Financial Times* as having high ambitions for growth this year. It is using the UK’s tax credit scheme for film and TV production, and it is a great domestic skills base. Will the Minister visit Shinfield studios with me and the hon. Member for Earley and Woodley, and have a conversation with the owners?

Chris Bryant: I have already had several conversations with the owners. It is a brilliant facility. As I said in my first speech today, we have a large number of studios. Incidentally, I am delighted that we launched the Labour campaign for Earley and Woodley just outside those studios. That obviously brought us good luck. Of course, I am happy to visit when time allows.

I am not sure that I will be able to answer every single question that has been asked, but there was one subject that exercised quite a lot of Members: access for all to the arts and creative industries.

David Chadwick: Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: I am very tempted to.

David Chadwick: I thank the Minister for giving way; it is very gracious of him. Many young farmers in Wales have told me that they would love to watch the output of the UK creative sector, particularly on Netflix, but they cannot. They are not able to download Netflix because their broadband is not good enough. What would the Minister advise them to do?

Chris Bryant: They should get in touch with the Telecoms Minister, but unfortunately he is rubbish. That is me. I am very happy to talk about the broadband issues in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency at any point, and if he wants a meeting with Building Digital UK, we can go through the specifics area by area. I have offered that to as many Members as I can.

Getting back to the creative industries, my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) was channelling his inner Frank Sinatra; he basically said, “If we can make it here, we’ll make it anywhere.” He made a very good point: we need to make sure that creativity is perceived not as something that we see only in the big cities of this country, but as something that we need to exercise in every single part of the country. My hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Nesil Caliskan) made a very similar point about her constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) made precisely that point—that creativity is not just about cities, but towns—as did my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris).

The hon. Member for Guildford (Zöe Franklin) said, “If only we could recruit from not just one demographic.” I feel that so strongly. Perhaps the most famous actor from my constituency was Sir Stanley Baker from Ferndale, famous for “Zulu”, a film that every Welsh person has to watch about 52 times a year. Bringing people into the creative industries from every demographic is a really important part of what we need to do.

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Chris Bryant: Well, my speech was meant to be brief. I will give way as long as Madam Deputy Speaker does not complain later.

Blair McDougall: I will be very brief, and I thank the Minister for giving way to a rampant socialist. In the light of the comments from the Opposition Front-Bench spokesman, does the Minister agree that just like people in all other sectors, the people who sell our programmes, build our sets and provide catering for our film sets deserve regular hours, and not to face zero-hours contracts that exploit them?

Chris Bryant: I completely agree. One of my colleagues—I cannot remember which—made a point about freelancers. One of the problems in the creative industries is that so many people today are freelancers, and it is very difficult for them to enjoy a regular income, take out a mortgage and so on. My mother was a make-up artist at the BBC in the 1950s—she looked after Shirley Bassey's wigs, among other things—and in those days that was a full-time paid role, but hardly a single make-up artist is afforded that today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Luton South and South Bedfordshire (Rachel Hopkins) made a point about the Hatters, but also about music and games in her constituency, and the importance of enabling emerging artists to prosper. My hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash) likewise made the point that we have to get beyond London and the south-east. That is sometimes a major issue in trying to attract commercial money into the creative industries, on which we are very focused.

My hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald) made a point about the importance of devolution, because we want to be able to make sure that this extends across the whole United Kingdom. The hon. Member for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey (Graham Leadbitter) made points—different cultural points—about books in Scots and the Gaelic song sung by Runrig. It is hardly ever mentioned that the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart) used to play in Runrig. [*Laughter.*]

Another subject that was predominant in the debate was about creative education and skills. The hon. Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox), who I think is in every debate I ever take part in, was absolutely right about the need to provide for greater skills in film. That is one of the things international companies come to the UK for, because we have such great film skills. In the past, such people were often trained by the BBC, but there is now very a different structure.

The hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) told us about his musical past, but he clarified for us the difference between correlation and causation: I think the Roxy closed on the day he sang there or played there, not because he played there. My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) made a very important point about Falmouth School of Art, where Tacita Dean, among others, trained. Of course, being able to have those centres of excellence spread across the whole of the United Kingdom—whether down in Falmouth or in Margate in Thanet—is really important.

In fact, my hon. Friend the Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington) made the point about the next generation and the inequality of access to the arts for many people. She also made a really important point about neurodivergent people. An interesting fact I came across when working with people in the jewellery industry is that more than 50% of people who work in jewellery are neurodivergent, and that is enabled by the Responsible Jewellery Council. The hon. Member for Eastleigh (Liz Jarvis) made an important point about the drop in A-levels and other exams. We need those skills not just for the arts themselves, but for all other industries, because those skills are needed by everybody.

I will come back to the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), but I notice that they want to bulldoze barriers. The hon. and learned Member almost persuaded me that Brexit was not a very good idea—I am probably not meant to have said that.

On financial burdens—a couple of Conservative Members mentioned the issue of national insurance contributions—I understand the political points that are being made. However, I would just point out that 50% of businesses will pay less in national insurance contributions or the same under the new scheme. Considering that most businesses in the creative sector are smaller than in the wider economy, that probably means there is a higher percentage in the creative industries. I do not want to diminish the concerns of many in this sector, but I do want to get this right.

I think my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling and Strathallan (Chris Kane) referred to the problem of people not paying for content and, for that matter, not paying artists when they come and perform. How often is it that everybody says, “Oh, we’ll get a singer along—I’m sure they’ll do it for free”? That is one of the things we need to put an end to, because in the end it should be possible for people to be able to make a living properly in the creative industries.

Several Members referred to the issue of music venues, including the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), who also spoke about financial backing in her own constituency, and the hon. Member for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry), to whom I have to say that I was really not convinced by the idea of curtailing the period of copyright to 10 years. I think that would destroy the livelihoods of thousands and thousands of people in the creative industries in the UK, but if she wants to put it to the electorate, then good luck with that.

I do not know how to refer to them—the Waldorf and Statler over there—but it is great that the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) and the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) both talked about the Soft Power Council, and I am glad we have got that up and running. I would be interested to hear whether they have specific ideas about what we should do. Good points were made by several Members about the British Council. I thought it was an act of vandalism a few years ago when it was effectively cut into ribbons, and it is a job of work for us to put it back together.

The hon. Member for Gosport is right about the Creative Industries Independent Standards Authority. We are committed to that, and I do not think that work is yet completed. I praise Jen Smith and Baroness Helena Kennedy for the work they are doing, and anything that

we can do to help, we will. The hon. Lady is also right about British stories. We want a mixed economy. We will talk about this more at the Select Committee tomorrow morning, but we want a mixed economy in film and for everybody to come and make their films here—American movies, Korean movies, Spanish movies, whatever—but we also want to make British stories in Britain that reflect the Britain that we live in, keeping some of that British IP in the UK so that the value remains here. The right hon. Member for Maldon rightly referred to the cultural protection fund, which of course we are committed to. That is important, not least in relation to our work in Ukraine.

Many Members mentioned artificial intelligence, and I fully understand the levels of concern, so let me say a few things. First, intellectual property is central to the viability of the creative industries, both individuals and the industries themselves. What are they selling, other than intellectual property?

Secondly, many creative industries of course use AI—my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Frith) referred to this in his very good speech—including Paul McCartney in the last year. I do not for one minute suggest that the creative industries are luddites—people seem to think that I have said that, but I certainly have not and it is not what I believe.

Thirdly, good generative AI needs good quality data, and that means licensing—paying for and getting permission for good quality data that is embodied in creative intellectual property. Mike Gross of Data Conversion Laboratory has made that point, and he knows his stuff. I suspect that in future the really good successful generative AI companies will be ones that go down that route.

Fourthly, we seek more licensing—in other words, more remuneration—greater control of rights, and legal clarity for all, and we are seeking to achieve those three things combined. As I said earlier, this is a genuine consultation. All of us are listening. I am doing most of the meetings with the creative industries. I know my counterpart in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, the Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Feryal Clark) is doing lots of meetings with the creative industries and people in AI, but most meetings with the creative industries are my job.

Doing nothing is not an option for us, as that would simply mean that we would have to wait for the courts to do their work. In truth, several court cases are already going on. Some of them have come to mutually contradictory views in different jurisdictions, and they do not necessarily provide the clarity of precedent that we might want. It is surely wrong that the only people who can enforce their rights are those with the deepest pockets who can afford to go through long, protracted and expensive court cases. I do not think doing nothing is an option. I am very much in the business of listening to what people think we should do. I have heard quite a lot of the things that people think we should not do, but I would love to hear things that people think we should do.

Quite a lot of people from the creative industries have knocked on my door. We have had meetings. Indeed, we have had very open meetings, and people have expressed their concerns. They have expressed support for some elements, including some that have not even been mentioned in this debate. I am determined to keep on listening to

the debate, and to try to find a solution that delivers for the creative industries and for artificial intelligence. It cannot be beyond the wit of humanity to be able to deliver that.

Pete Wishart: It is encouraging that there is real positivity to the Minister's comments, and I understand that he is trying his hardest to resolve a tricky question. He has heard the creative industries, and he knows that this idea of an opt-out does not work for them. It is all good telling us what we are not supporting and what we would support, but what does he support? If the opt-out is not going to happen, what would he do?

Chris Bryant: I support securing more licensing, greater control of rights and legal clarity for all. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. As I said to the right hon. Member for Maldon, there is not a version of rights reservation that works at the moment and is simple and easy. As an author, I know that if someone wants to register for the public lending right, they have to go online and register each of their works. That is relatively simple and straightforward for someone who writes books, because they have only two or three or four. For a photographer, it is a completely different business. We have to come to a technical answer that works for everybody. If there is not a technical answer, we will have to think again. That is the sum total of where we are at. Everybody has supported the transparency measures that have been referred to. It might be that Members would also want to support some of the rights to a personality that have been exercised in some parts of the United States and other parts of Europe that have not been referred to.

I am sure everybody wants me to stop by now. The hon. Member for Gosport referred to several songs that she thought I should adopt as my motto. I think one was "Respect". I am not sure whether she meant Aretha Franklin's "R-E-S-P-E-C-T", or Erasure's "A Little Respect", which I prefer:

I try to discover

A little something to make me sweeter.

I am not sure which of those two she prefers, but I think I will rely on Depeche Mode in the end. When it comes to the creative industries,

I just can't get enough.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the creative industries.

Business without Debate

PROCEDURE

Ordered,

That Frank McNally be discharged from the Procedure Committee and David Baines be added.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

WORK AND PENSIONS

Ordered,

That Ben Obese-Jecty be a member of the Work and Pensions Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

PETITION

Intensive Poultry Units

9.42 pm

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I am honoured to have been asked to present this petition on behalf of more than 30,000 supporters of the Soil Association who are deeply concerned about the impact of intensive poultry production on river pollution. This issue is of particular concern to residents in my constituency of North Herefordshire, where the River Wye and its tributaries, such as the River Lugg, are deeply impacted by phosphate pollution, with troubling effects on wildlife and the wider economy. Indeed, the concern prompted me to establish the all-party parliamentary group on water pollution, of which I am co-chair.

The 30,543 petitioners

“therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to introduce a ban on new intensive poultry units, to support farmers to exit this industry and to take action to reduce chicken consumption to more sustainable levels.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that industrial chicken farming produces huge volumes of polluting chicken manure which, when spread as fertiliser on nearby fields, can cause phosphate from the manure to leech into rivers, causing algal blooms which starve the river of oxygen; further that the River Wye is close to complete ecological collapse, with damaging pollution from industrial chicken farming as a leading cause; notes that the Environment Agency reports ‘unacceptable levels’ of phosphate in over half of English rivers; and further that other rivers across the United Kingdom are also at serious risk from an increase in intensive poultry units; and further notes that a similar online petition by the Soil Association received over 30,000 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to introduce a ban on new intensive poultry units, to support farmers to exit this industry and to take action to reduce chicken consumption to more sustainable levels.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003035]

A&E Services: Solihull Borough

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

9.43 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): I stand today to make the case for accident and emergency services in Solihull borough. Ever since I was first elected in 2019, through covid to now in 2025, I have campaigned for better health resources in my constituency and across Solihull borough. Like many across the country, I am grateful for the national health service. Indeed, I owe my life to the NHS, having fallen seriously ill as a child at the age of three. It was an NHS doctor who saved my life after my parents had been told I had mere hours to live, and it was NHS nurses who cared for me. When my children were born, NHS nurses delivered them and NHS doctors cared for them and for my wife. Like many of my constituents, I am ever grateful for the NHS staff who were on the frontline during the pandemic, in the most difficult circumstances that one can imagine.

I am proud to stand up for the NHS in my constituency. I have been fortunate to have campaigned for a number of successful outcomes in the borough of Solihull, where we have a positive story to tell. I supported the introduction of integrated care systems in the Health and Care Act 2022. As I said to the then Health Secretary, it was clear to me that we needed an organisation that would be more accountable to the public. The Birmingham and Solihull integrated care board was born as a result of that legislation.

The Solihull Conservatives led a campaign to get a new urgent treatment centre, and our petition garnered more than 11,000 signatures. I am pleased that the UTC at Solihull hospital was opened in 2023. It has been vital in easing pressures on local services and for local residents, and I have used it for myself and my family. We also have new elective surgery units, built with start-of-the-art robotics. I am delighted that just a few weeks ago, they reached their 1,000th operation.

On top of that, the brand-new locality hub at Solihull hospital aims to provide early intervention and urgent response care for patients in the borough, and it will be vital in providing much-needed relief for local services. Alongside that, the brand-new community diagnostic centre that I secured for north Solihull is currently being built. I had the pleasure of visiting the new facility, which is forecast to deliver almost 116,000 diagnostic appointments, including MRIs, ultrasounds and much more.

As the Minister will see, we have a strong track record of delivering health services for our constituents in the borough of Solihull. However, one thing is lacking. It is clear when I talk to local residents that Solihull borough needs accident and emergency services. Solihull hospital used to have an A&E, but it closed in 2013. A recent write-up of my campaign by the *Solihull Observer* correctly identified that, stating:

“Historically Solihull did have an A&E department but in 2013 hospital bosses admitted there had not been a full and proper A&E at Solihull for many years – with A&E services dwindling bit by bit over two decades.”

The Minister will note that things have seriously changed. First of all, Solihull hospital is thriving. I am pleased that there has been a collective recognition that it must be nurtured and preserved. Silhillians who are in need

of medical treatment for broken bones, sprains, cuts, stomach pains, rashes and minor burns can always book an appointment at the urgent treatment centre that I just mentioned at the Lode Lane hospital, but for anything more serious, residents are redirected to Heartlands hospital in Bordesley Green.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this debate. I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Member's Financial Interests, given my background in the GMB trade union, which represents ambulance workers in the West Midlands ambulance service. Does he agree that during the difficult winter period, ambulance staff endured an extremely difficult time, and we should all pay tribute to their professionalism? Does he further agree with ambulance crews that if we had more community-based health services, pressure on those central accident and emergency centres would be reduced?

Saqib Bhatti: The hon. Member makes an important point. Every winter we see the strain on our health services. Our professionals in hospitals and ambulance services always make an important contribution. His second question is really for the Government. I will talk a little more about the future vision for my constituents and his.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member on securing this debate, and I share his concerns. In my constituency and the neighbouring one, units in North Down and Ards were closed and moved to Dundonald, putting pressure on that hospital. At the A&E at Dundonald—perhaps Solihull is the same—patients have to wait 14 hours to be seen for a heart attack. The A&E must be up to scratch. Travelling is one thing, but the A&E has to be able to respond. Does he agree that we need the right A&Es?

Saqib Bhatti: I cannot disagree with the hon. Gentleman. He makes a really valid point. Of course, it is about not just the travel time, but the time that is spent there. As I will come on to say, there is discussion about the A&E at Heartlands hospital, which has similar issues.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): On the point about time spent waiting in A&E, one issue we have found in Winchester is that a significant proportion of the caseload consists of people with mental health issues—sometimes suffering a mental health crisis. Many of them are already on a waiting list, but some mental health waiting lists are hitting 18 months or two years from the point of referral to the necessary specialist treatment. That is putting a huge amount of pressure on our A&E departments, as it takes a huge amount of resources to deal with mental health crises. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that investing heavily in mental health services will also help to reduce A&E waiting times?

Saqib Bhatti: Of course, investment will make a big difference. That is why I think integrated care boards play an important role, because there is accountability all the way up to the Minister. It is also about how resources are distributed locally for the needs of the community.

I spoke about the journey to Heartlands hospital. At any given time, it can take 40 minutes, and it quite regularly takes more than an hour. In a situation where every minute matters, I am afraid that is just not good enough for my constituents. It could quite literally be a matter of life or death.

Solihull borough has a population of approximately 216,000 people, and that is set only to grow.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way and for bringing this debate to the Chamber. Being neighbouring MPs, he and I have worked very closely on this issue. He notes the size of Solihull borough; of course, with the Government's housing plans, that is likely to increase significantly, almost touching a quarter of a million. Does he agree that in those circumstances, it is absolutely critical that we have an A&E provision within the borough to serve the community?

Saqib Bhatti: I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution and for all the work he has done on the matter, including the petition he launched, which I will come on to later. He is absolutely right, and he leads me to my next point.

The Minister's own Government have set out their planning reforms, which mean that valuable and precious green belt will now be built on as housing numbers are massively increased, putting our local infrastructure under strain. As we can see, that is a concern across the country, on a cross-party basis. My hon. Friend the Member for Solihull West and Shirley (Dr Shastri-Hurst) has made significant progress talking to his constituents on this issue. I know they feel exactly the same way, and I look forward to working with him.

Significantly, more than 40% of our residents are reportedly over the age of 50. As we go through this especially cold winter, as the hon. Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) said, we must all remember that the winter is a challenging time not only for the NHS, but for our constituents. Cold and flu cases are at their peak and place additional pressures on the NHS. Every Christmas, we face a timely reminder that we are in desperate need of an A&E in Solihull, so I am grateful to have secured this debate early in the new year.

Although I will not focus on social care today, I can assure the Minister that I will return to this topic at some point. I simply make the point that kicking the can down the road on issues such as social care will cause further anxiety to my constituents and exacerbate the strain on our hospitals. All Governments, of all ilk, need to deal with social care.

The Government's response does not deal with social care, nor does it deal with the problem of the country's ageing population, especially in areas such as Meriden and Solihull East. The long-term social care issues faced by our NHS are made far worse by the fact that there is a national average of 14% more attendees at A&E than there were 10 years ago, which means that more people now face longer waiting times. As of August 2024, 65.4% of patients in Birmingham and Solihull ICB spent less than four hours in A&E departments, and that is markedly below the NHS target of 95%. I hope that the Minister might be able to comment on that and share any thinking on increasing that figure.

[Saqib Bhatti]

I believe I have already set this out adequately, but it is worth repeating that residents in my borough have to travel to different areas to access A&E services. Given the size of the local population and the likelihood that demand for emergency services will only increase further, it is obvious that Solihull residents need to be supported by dedicated A&E services. That is because a dedicated A&E in Solihull borough will take pressure off other A&E departments, lowering waiting times across the whole area to the benefit of thousands of people in the west midlands. Can the Minister give any indication as to whether she considered those arguments in the previous correspondence that my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull West and Shirley and I have had with her?

Moreover, my constituents and I are very concerned that this issue will become increasingly pressing because of the Government's planning changes and their potential changes to the national policy planning framework. If the Government were to achieve the objective of removing consent from local people, the demand for local infrastructure—from schools to roads and health services—would go up and inevitably become unsustainable.

I launched my petition in May last year to restore A&E services to Solihull hospital. I can confirm to the Minister that I did not know a general election would be called a week later. Within a week, we had about 1,000 signatures. I have had about 1,600 and I think my hon. Friend has had a similar amount, so we are reaching more than 3,000 residents who support our campaign. The petition remains open on our websites for further support. I assure my constituents that I will not falter or waver in my resolve to see the campaign through.

Let me help the Minister. I understand that such projects do not happen overnight, but surely she will agree that a case such as this must be looked at. There has to be a long-term vision and plan to start to deal with issues, such as an increased population, which are clearly coming down the road. When my hon. Friend and I wrote to the Minister in November, we outlined the arguments for enhanced healthcare provision for Solihull borough. We were disappointed with the Minister's response, which failed to cover some of the assertions we made, and that is why I put in for an Adjournment debate. I want to give the Minister another chance, because it cannot be possible that she does not have a view on long-term health provision for my constituents.

For clarity, the Minister argued that the NHS Birmingham and Solihull ICB was responsible for funding and implementation in the area. I am sure that is a matter of fact, but she must have a view, even though it will play a decisive role in decision making on these matters. It would be really helpful to my constituents and those of my hon. Friend if she agreed, at least in principle, to look at our plans, even if she does not quite support them. Will she agree to look at the long-term need of my constituents, especially in the light of the extra housing the Government are demanding be delivered on our greenbelt? It is a point worth making that as a result of the extra building, my constituents will be making huge sacrifices. The least the Government could do is to recognise that and provide the infrastructure to match.

The Minister confirmed that the Government were committed to delivering the new hospital plan. She said the Chancellor had confirmed that in the Budget there

would be a £3.1 billion increase in the overall departmental capital budget over this year and the next. The Secretary of State committed, in his piece in the *London Standard* in June, to delivering the new hospitals programme, so I was disappointed that there was no mention of Solihull borough in his statement last week. I want to ask the Minister a very simple question. The Government set out plans that take hospital building to 2039. Does that mean that our constituents in Solihull borough will not get a look-in from the Labour Government until then? Will it be 15 years before we can even start to think about new plans to support Solihull borough? It would be really helpful to get clarity on that.

In our correspondence, my hon. Friend and I made the case for part of the £3.1 billion uplift in the NHS capital budget to be spent in our area. The Minister should be assured that we will take every opportunity in this House to make the case for an A&E in Solihull. Will she now instruct her officials to take a long, hard look at that and take a constructive view on the long-term plan? Indeed, just a few days ago—this is the point I wanted to come to when I was intervened on—it was reported in the *Birmingham Mail* that the University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust is looking for a £200 million investment to create a new urgent and emergency care facility at Heartlands hospital, because the facilities are “disconnected and inefficient”, and that “patient numbers continue to increase, being cared for in buildings which are dark, cramped and not fit for the current purpose”.

That could not be clearer. The report prompts the question: why should my constituents be subject to those conditions? They deserve better. They deserve the very best health facilities. I will not let up, and nor will my hon. Friend. We will keep coming back. With more than 3,000 people having signed our petitions, will the Minister do the right thing and back our campaign for a new A&E in Solihull?

When I raised this issue on the Floor of the House, the Health Secretary wanted to know where I would spend the money differently. Perhaps the Minister has a similar line in her speech. This is not a party political point, but we would have chosen not to spend billions on trade union sweetheart deals in return for nothing. We would probably not have spent billions on GB Energy, which will not deliver outcomes or reduce bills. That money could pay for an A&E in Solihull many times over. Politics is all about choices, so I ask the Minister: will she do the right thing and choose to engage constructively, so we can deliver the best outcomes for our constituents?

10 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Martin McCuskey*).

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): I congratulate the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) on securing the debate, and congratulate other Members who have taken part in it. Let me start by thanking the NHS staff at Solihull Hospital for their remarkable efforts, stamina and care in the most challenging circumstances. That point was well made by the hon. Gentleman, and I know he feels passionately that he owes his own life and the lives of many others to their care.

The hon. Gentleman said that he did not want to make political points and that politics was about choices, but we did inherit an NHS that was in the worst state in its history. I hope he agrees with Lord Darzi's diagnosis; we have still not heard from his colleagues whether they agree with it. The condition of the capital estate, as well as NHS services, has shocked the country, notwithstanding the result of the election, but we are working at full scale to making that situation better. The hon. Gentleman is right that politics is about choices, and I think that the wrong choices were made in the past 14 years.

It is right to point to the increasing demand for emergency departments in Solihull and elsewhere over the past decade, part of which can be explained by the appalling neglect of GP and primary care services to manage demand, and the failure of all parties—to which the hon. Gentleman alluded—to build consensus on a long-term solution for social care and support the flow of people through those hospitals. As the hon. Gentleman knows, Solihull Borough is within the University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust. In December, 58.2% of people were seen within four hours.

Let me set out some of the wider context. We need to remember that we have had one of the busiest flu seasons for a number of years, and although the number of cases is coming down, the number of Norovirus cases is still 80% higher than it was in the same period last year. We want to end the treatment of people in corridors, which has become normal and which it is completely unacceptable. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has made clear, this is not the level of care that staff want for their patients, and it is not the level of care that the Government will ever accept for patients. It will take time to return to the standards that patients deserve, but it can be done. We did it before in government, and we will do it again. To mitigate pressures in Solihull and elsewhere, we are reforming the NHS to shift the focus of healthcare out of hospitals and into the community, freeing up beds for emergency patients and preventing so many people from having to call an ambulance or go to A&E in the first place. In the last two months, we have announced steps to begin rebuilding general practice and immediate long-term action on social care.

I understand that in November 2024, NHS Birmingham Solihull integrated care board had an average of 6.3 full-time GPs per 10,000 patients, just above the average in England, which stands at six. A few weeks after the election, we announced an extra £82 million of funding to increase access to GPs, and it is improving. Birmingham Solihull ICB area had 30 more GPs in November than in July, and I hope that that improvement has been felt by the hon. Gentleman's constituents. In December we announced an extra £888 million in funding for GPs, the biggest funding uplift in years, alongside a package of reforms to bust bureaucracy, slash unnecessary targets, and give them more time to spend with patients as a first step towards bringing back the family doctor.

As well as considering demand, we know that there is no solution for accident and emergency activity that does not include fixing our broken social care system. Today there are about 12,000 patients in hospital beds who have no criteria to reside but cannot be discharged. The main reason for the delays is to do with capacity. More than 300 patients in that category are in the Birmingham Solihull ICB. I hope that the hon. Gentleman and, indeed, all Members will work with us to resolve

the situation, but that is why the Government are making up to £3.7 billion of extra funding available for local authorities to provide social care, why we are delivering extra 7,800 adaptations through the disabled facilities grant this year and next year, why we have delivered the biggest increase in carer's allowance since the 1970s—worth an extra £2,300 to family carers—why we are introducing fair pay agreements to tackle the 131,000 vacancies for care workers that we inherited, and why we are appointing Louise Casey to develop a national consensus on that long-term solution for social care.

It is also clear that we can get our ambulance and A&E services working better, so before the spring we will set out the lessons learned from this winter and the improvements that we will put in place ahead of next winter. We are content to visit and hear from hon. Members from across the House about the situation in their areas.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the 2022 Act. I was on the Bill Committee and tabled a number of suggestions for better accountability of ICBs to local Members of Parliament, most of which were not accepted by the Government of the time. I agree with him that those organisations need to be more accountable to him and to other Members of Parliament representing their constituents.

We expect integrated care boards to ensure that the areas they run are safe, putting necessary care in the community, investing in technology and doing what is best for the people they are responsible for. The Government are investing an extra £26 billion in our health and care services while undertaking fundamental reform to help the ICB deliver the services that all our constituents expect. If the ICB intends to make substantial changes to the way it delivers services, it must conduct a public consultation and must meet the test to ensure that all proposals are proven to be in the interests of patients and the wider public.

I know that the hon. Gentleman will be meeting the ICB in a few weeks, and I am sure that he will continue to make his points to it; I suspect that it is watching or listening to our proceedings. I am sure that he would agree that it is for the people locally in Solihull to determine how their interests are best served. Ministers cannot impose views above the heads of the local ICB. Those decisions are best made in Solihull by people who live in Solihull and not in Westminster. Therefore, what I can do—what the Government are doing—is give ICBs the means to deliver services while undertaking fundamental reform of how those services are delivered. The hon. Gentleman is therefore doing exactly what he should do as an experienced Member of Parliament and making his case to the local ICB. I am sure that it will have heard him this evening and that his voice will be important in representing his constituents.

The hon. Gentleman was entirely right to raise population growth and planning, which was also mentioned by the hon. Gentleman's neighbour, the hon. Member for Solihull West and Shirley (Dr Shastri-Hurst). We are committed to house building, unlike his Government; it is important that that goes ahead. That does put pressure on services. Unfortunately, under the previous Government, developments were not going ahead because of the issue of infrastructure. That is something that we are addressing.

[Karin Smyth]

The disconnect between ICBs and local authorities must change—the situation with vital infrastructure such as schools and hospitals has gone on for far too long—which is why we are committed to working with colleagues at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that planning includes basic infrastructure. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has regular meetings with the Deputy Prime Minister to ensure that we are all pulling in the same direction on that.

Communities across the country, including the hon. Gentlemen's constituents in Solihull, are struggling with poor services and crumbling estates. We are putting

record capital funding into the NHS while reforming services to ensure that every penny of that money is spent well. We will return to 95% of patients being seen within four hours at A&E, we will get waiting lists back down to where they were in 2010, and we will fix the front door to the NHS with the GP services that all our constituents deserve. It will take time, but we will deliver an NHS and national care service that provide people with the care they need when they need it, and we will continue to work with all hon. Members across the House to ensure that that happens.

10.8 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 27 January 2025

[MARTIN VICKERS *in the Chair*]

Speech and Language Therapy

4.30 pm

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 657935 relating to speech and language therapy.

May I say what a pleasure it is to lead this debate with you in the Chair, Mr Vickers? Before I turn to e-petition 657935, I beg your indulgence to mention that today is International Holocaust Memorial Day and the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Given that it is possibly the last significant anniversary on which many of the survivors will be with us, it is really important that we mark today, because we must never, ever forget the crimes that were committed in the early part of the last century. I stand four-square behind the work of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance in making sure that we never forget and that we can turn darkness into light.

Today I am introducing a debate on a topic that we so often take for granted, particularly those of us who have the opportunity to contribute to the debate. Communication, and our ability to speak and to put our views on the record, is fundamental. It is fundamental to Members of Parliament because of the job that we do, but it is also fundamental to everybody across this country and, in fact, across the globe. The power of communication is in our ability to speak and to express our thoughts, our feelings, our hopes, our needs and our politics. In its simplest definition, it is how we connect with each other.

For some people, however, it is not so simple. The words, feelings and thoughts are there, but they cannot quite find how to get their words out. That is so difficult for many people, and we should never overlook it, because every single human being has the ability to communicate and a need to connect with people. Supporting people to make sure that they can always find the words, and that they can always communicate and reach out to others, is something that I am sure everybody would support.

That is where speech and language therapy steps in—not just as a treatment, but as a lifeline and a way to help people to find the words. It is about helping people to find their voice and to overcome the barriers that keep them from being heard. If we cannot communicate, we can feel invisible and alone, which is a huge challenge in itself. Speech and language therapy is more than just a clinical service; it is absolutely vital to a huge number of people across this great country. It is the bridge between silence and expression, and between isolation and inclusion. Speech and language therapists are the unsung heroes who help people to rediscover their ability to speak, to listen and to engage with the world, regardless of whether they are a child who struggles to form words, an adult recovering from a stroke, or someone with a lifelong condition that affects communication.

Last week, I had the great privilege of speaking to Mikey, who created this fantastic petition. One thing that struck me in that meeting was not just how thoughtful, well prepared, well read and on top of every single part of the issue he was, but his determination that this debate should not just be about him. It is not about Mikey's treatment or his journey, although he is very able and willing to discuss them with people; it is about Mikey standing up for people who find themselves in a similar situation to him. When we meet somebody who is a true campaigner, and who is willing to spend their time and effort supporting people across their community, we should applaud them. I place on the record my thanks to him for his work.

When I spoke to Mikey, he told me that he is actually one of the lucky ones. A year and a half after he was diagnosed with apraxia, he was offered an hour of speech therapy a week. That was a huge boon to Mikey's ability to take part, develop and just be part of the world. He feels lucky for that one hour, because the ability to access speech and language therapists is a postcode lottery, but it should not be a matter of luck. Getting help for something so important should be a minimum; in fact, the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists recommends four sessions a week for Mikey's condition. Mikey raised that not because he did not feel supported, but as an example of the fact that current provision and support do not meet the need, even for people like Mikey, who, in his own words, is lucky to have the support that he has had.

Just over 23,500 adults and more than 67,000 children and young people are on a waiting list for speech and language therapy. Every one of those lives can be touched and immeasurably improved by ensuring that they have the treatment they need to rebuild the confidence that they may have lost. Mikey told me that, after his treatment, his confidence has grown, he is less anxious, he is able to speak publicly with strangers and friends, and he has been able to get a job and catch up in education. That is all down to the speech and language therapists who have supported him to reach his goals. Not everything is down to the therapists, obviously—Mikey is responsible for a huge amount of what he has done—but his ability to express himself, and to show the world where he is coming from and what he does, is down to the language therapists who have supported him.

I met representatives of the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists and Speech and Language UK last year, and the most striking thing that came out of those meetings was how important it is to look at this issue through the lens of social justice. The most striking piece of data that they shared is that 25% of all children, when they go to primary school, have some form of diagnosed or undiagnosed speech, language and communications need. If one looks at the most deprived areas of the country, that percentage rises to 50%.

On top of that, more than 60% of children in young offender institutions have communication difficulties. That information—that reality—is too stark to be an accident; something could be driving that. Reaching out and ensuring that people can express themselves and engage with the world at large, whether that is school, friends or family, can support them to access the world and prevent them from going down a path that could end with them making some difficult decisions and finding themselves incarcerated.

[Dave Robertson]

However, it is not just about young people; it is also about adults who develop conditions such as dementia, Parkinson's, which is close to my heart, or long covid, which we will be talking about a lot over the coming years in the post-pandemic world. The speech and language difficulties that can come with long covid have driven demand since the pandemic, although there was significant demand for speech and language therapists before that.

I will touch briefly on Parkinson's, because a close family member—my mum—suffers with it. Mam learned English to go to school, as her family spoke Welsh at home, and since she moved to England, where she brought up me and my brothers, she has spent her whole adult life communicating in her second language. Mam was also fluent in French. Seeing where she has gone with her Parkinson's—just not being able to find the words—is a real challenge for all of us who know her. Helping her to find that word and communicate is something that I think everybody who knows her would support, and I am sure that anybody with a relative in a similar position would also be eager to support them with that.

Parkinson's UK did an audit of its members in 2022 and, of the people it spoke to, just 40% had access to speech and language therapy. Only 15.5% were referred to therapists at the diagnosis stage and only 8% were seen. That is one example—I beg the House's forgiveness for raising one of such significance to me; I picked it because that is where I have a lot of direct experience—but there are many, many conditions that can be supported through speech and language therapy.

Returning to the postcode lottery that I mentioned, there are areas of this country where integrated care boards are spending less than £1 per person receiving therapy—I think 58p was the smallest number that I saw. In the best-funded area for speech and language therapy, the ICB was spending £16.35 per child who was receiving therapy, which is a vast difference. Now, I am not going to say that ICBs are not doing their job; we are all aware that there are regional disparities and that ICBs have to cut their cloth according to the funding available. When we see such a significant disparity, however, with around 30 or 32 times the amount being spent in one area compared with another, it highlights that for far too many people, it is a real fight to get the support that they need because the funding is not there.

In the Minister's response, I am interested to hear whether anything can be done in the long-term 10-year health plan for the NHS to set minimum standards or whether the Government intend to level the playing field between different areas. Many people, especially those from disadvantaged communities, live in areas where services are scarce and where waiting times are long. That can exacerbate some of the issues faced by those communities, as well as by the individuals affected.

We know that it is not always about just funding or putting more money into the system. Where money is needed, it should be there, but recruiting and retaining speech and language therapists is vital. No amount of funding in the world can replace a human being actually doing that role, or the skills, training and care that they provide for the people they are supporting.

There is a shortage of therapists in our system, and many are leaving the profession due to burnout, insufficient support and unsustainable workloads. When I spoke to the royal college, it was absolutely clear that recruitment is one side of the coin, but retention is the other. It is not just an operational necessity, but how we increase the number of speech and language therapists available and make sure that the more experienced people can train, support and mentor people who are less experienced to get through those grades, from grade 5 to grade 6 and so on.

A survey by the royal college found that 17% of speech and language therapy roles are currently vacant. That is a huge number: almost one in five. Ensuring that we have the right number of people to support the vital care that people need would have a profound effect across the country. The biggest shortages are in bands 6 and 7 in the NHS, which are the more specialist roles.

Across the board, therapists are saying that they want to do the job. Nobody goes into healthcare for the money, but because it is a vocation and they want to support their community and support people where they need it. To support them, however, we have to do something about caseloads to ensure that they can devote enough time to each person they see.

I am proud that the Government will bring forward a 10-year plan to offer a vision of a healthier, more resilient NHS. However, given how well supported this petition has been and how important speech and language therapy is for people who need it, I am very eager to hear that the Government are taking the issue seriously and making sure that speech and language therapy is fully integrated into that 10-year plan, so that we can look much more at preventive care, get community services to deliver support where it is most needed, and prevent those acute issues developing.

I am very glad to see so many hon. Members from both sides of the House in the Chamber. Ultimately, this debate is an opportunity for us to talk about speech and language therapy, and to make sure that it has the place that it deserves at the heart of our health system. I am sure that there is much more that other hon. Members will want to say, and I look forward to the contribution from the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti).

Several hon. Members rose—

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that they should bob—as indeed they are doing—if they wished to be called to speak.

4.44 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): It is a great privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson). He gave an excellent speech, and I cannot think of a single thing that I disagreed with—although I might wait to read the *Hansard* to double-check that. He spoke passionately about his own mum and the situation with Parkinson's.

As for many Members across this House, issues of special educational needs, and speech and language therapy are not new to me or to my inbox, so I think this is a timely and important debate. It is particularly

important because of the hard work of one of my constituents, Mikey Akers, who is in the Public Gallery today, along with his mother and friends, whom I will also mention. He was the instigator of the petition, which is very much the reason why we are here.

Mikey first came to see me on 13 January 2022. Little did I know at that point that this young man would be such a giant when it came to standing up for children and adults everywhere who have been affected by speech and language conditions. In many ways, this young man has given voice to so many up and down the country who, through no fault of their own, do not have their voice.

Mikey's ask of me was really simple. He looked at me and said, "Will you help me to raise awareness of verbal dyspraxia?" I am not afraid to admit that I had no idea what verbal dyspraxia was at that moment, but of course I said yes, because for us as Members, one of the easiest things that we can commit to is using our platform to raise awareness of issues that particularly affect not only our constituents, but others across the country.

I went away to investigate verbal dyspraxia and see how widespread it was. I found out that there is a huge lack of awareness of verbal dyspraxia, and yet there were friends of mine, parliamentarians in the previous Parliament, who suffered from various forms of dyspraxia, as I found out when I raised Mikey's issue at Prime Minister's questions. Parliamentarians came to speak to me about them having some form of it, or said that they knew someone who did. Simply, for those who do not know, verbal dyspraxia is when a child has difficulties in being able to make and co-ordinate the movements needed to produce speech that is clear and easy to understand.

Like the hon. Member for Lichfield, I then set about meeting the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, the Dyspraxia Foundation, and many other expert organisations and practitioners. I draw attention to Gillian Rudd, who is in the Public Gallery and is a senior lecturer at Birmingham City University. She is training future speech and language therapists—I will also touch on the workforce. She contributed to the "Bercow: Ten Years On" report, and her petition—back in 2018, garnering 11,000 signatures at the time—led to a Westminster Hall debate on the topic. Gillian came to see me in 2020, and I am so pleased that I have been able to at least highlight her work and to support her in all the work she has been doing.

Since my first meeting with Mikey, I have been able to raise the issue of speech and language therapy and verbal dyspraxia in the House on a number of occasions, including at PMQs. I am pleased that in conjunction with Mikey, the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, and Chris Kamara—who, as you may be aware, Mr Vickers, is a well-known footballer and commentator—we were able to hold an event in the previous Parliament calling on the Government to do more to support speech and language therapists.

I have talked about verbal dyspraxia, so I will say that Chris—I hope he will not mind me saying this, as he has spoken about it in public—suffered during lockdown from apraxia. In his role, voice and speech matter so much, with the intonations and being able to get thoughts out. I will not try to copy his most famous lines, but those things matter so much. He was so brave in the way he spoke about it. Kammy and Mikey were kind enough

to invite me on to their documentary, "Lost for Words", which is on the ITV player. The documentary is illuminating for anyone who wants to get an understanding of some of the challenges families face across the country and of the trials and tribulations that parents and children go through to get the support that they need. Georgia Leckie, who was on it, is also in the Gallery.

This issue has affected so many of us in this Parliament and in previous Parliaments. Under the previous Government, the Department for Education committed £8 billion to special educational needs in the 2021-22 financial year. In the financial year '22-23, that was increased by £1 billion to more than £9.1 billion, and at the 2021 spending review, the Government announced £2.6 billion, over the spending review period to 2025, to create more than 30,000 new high-quality school places for children with special educational needs and disabilities—more than tripling the previous capital funding levels to over £900 million to '24-25.

That was a transformational investment, which I was proud of, and it supported local authorities to deliver new places in mainstream and special schools, as well as other specialist settings. It would also have been used to improve the suitability and accessibility of existing buildings. Of course, none of that is to say that there was not more that needed to be done, or that needs to be done.

A £2.6 billion capital investment in high-needs provision was announced in October 2021. That was to deliver up to 60 new special and alternative provision free schools, and was in addition to the 48 special free schools already in the pipeline and the more than 90 that were already open. In fact, a number have opened in the borough of Solihull, which I represent, and one opened recently in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull West and Shirley (Dr Shastri-Hurst). In March 2022, the Government announced high-needs provision capital allocations amounting to over £1.4 billion-worth of new investment, which was focused on the academic years '23-24 and '24-25.

Of course, there has been a change of Government and a change of priorities, so will the Minister set out whether that funding will be increasing and what his intentions are in that regard? In March, the previous Government published their SEND and AP improvement plan. The plan set out what the Government would do to establish a single national system to deliver for every child and young person with special needs and disabilities from birth to age 25, so that they could enjoy their childhood, achieve good outcomes and be well prepared for their next step, whether that was employment, higher education or adult services. Has that plan continued, or has it informed current Government strategy and how the Government intend to take the previous Government's ambitions forward?

It is no secret that councils are under great strain, so I hope that the Minister can highlight how, in the coming years, the Government intend to support local councils to alleviate that strain, especially when it comes to SLT and integrated care boards. The hon. Member for Lichfield mentioned the demand on the workforce, which has been a perennial issue—the RCSLT briefing for this debate also highlighted it. How do the Government intend to alleviate pressures in this area? Do they intend to fund more places, especially at the university level? These are complex issues, and highly skilled people are needed.

[Saqib Bhatti]

I also want to ask a few questions that Mikey had. One of the key things that he has raised with me from the first day I met him is the lack of awareness in the teaching profession and among GPs when it comes to identifying cases of verbal dyspraxia. The Minister might not be able to answer on the education side, but he might be able to say how the Government intend to ensure that health professionals are prepared to identify some of these serious issues. Of course, I have to ask whether the Minister will agree to meet me, Mikey, RCSLT and—given the cross-party nature of this debate—the hon. Member for Lichfield. Can the Minister also describe the timeframe for any increases in spending? The hon. Member for Lichfield mentioned the retention of the workforce, so what are the Minister's thoughts on ensuring that we keep more of the people who enter this profession?

The metrics that we use to assess policies are key, so can the Minister describe the metrics for a successful policy around speech and language therapy? That would ensure that Members can assess the policy going forward. I hope that the answer to this question is yes, but do the Government recognise the economic benefits of getting people, young people and those who are young at heart to have better speech and language therapy and to contribute to the economy?

I will finish where I started: by encouraging people such as Mikey, as well as those he inspires, to continue to campaign on this issue. There is always more to be done. I have met Mikey a number of times, and he really is a legend. I thank him for allowing me to support him on his journey. I will end with some of his words:

"I raise awareness of verbal Dyspraxia/Apraxia so those who share my diagnosis, now and in the future, never feel the loneliness I felt growing up."

4.54 pm

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) for securing this important debate. I also thank Mikey Akers, all campaigners and the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists for their tireless efforts in bringing this critical issue to the forefront and getting it the priority that it needs. I heard, remarkably, that when Mikey started the petition on the Parliament website back in March 2024, something like over 10,000 signatures were secured in just 16 days. However, I am not surprised, because communication is at the heart of who we are. It is how we connect, learn, work and build relationships. It is a fundamental human right. Just as vital is the ability to eat and drink safely when swallowing becomes difficult. For deaf people, who already face enormous barriers, access to timely and appropriate support is even more crucial.

In September 2024, more than 64,000 children in England were waiting for speech and language therapy. In my Wolverhampton North East constituency, children and families are facing unacceptable delays and limited access. Behind each number is a child struggling to communicate in the classroom, a young adult trying to rebuild their life after a brain injury, or a stroke survivor who feels isolated because their voice has been taken away.

I would like to share the story of Samantha, one of my constituents who knows that struggle all too well. Samantha is a former modern foreign languages teacher in Wolverhampton. After a stroke during the pandemic, her ability to speak four languages and her independence were severely impacted. Samantha is mobile—her disability is hidden, but you would know after speaking with her. Yet accessing the specialist speech and language therapy she needed was an uphill battle. Samantha's story is not unique. It is a reality for far too many people across the country.

Let us not forget the workforce challenges. Speech and language therapists are invaluable, yet there simply are not enough of them to meet the growing demand. Despite efforts such as the speech and language degree apprenticeship, we are still falling short. Private therapy is out of reach for most families, leaving NHS services overwhelmed. The current system is underfunded, overstretched and unprepared for the future. Meanwhile, adults in the Black Country integrated care board are waiting far too long, with over 1,000 people on waiting lists in November 2024.

What do we need to move forward? First, we need to increase funding to meet growing demand. Secondly, we need a robust workforce plan so that we have enough skilled therapists to support everyone in need. Thirdly, we need equitable access to therapy across the health, education and criminal justice sectors, no matter where someone lives. Investing in speech and language therapy not only changes lives; it saves money. Early intervention can reduce the need for more costly services down the line in health, education and criminal justice.

I urge the Minister and my colleagues to listen to the voices of campaigners such as Mikey, the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists and people like Samantha. Their message is clear: we must work at pace to tackle the crisis in speech and language therapy. Let us make sure that no one in Wolverhampton North East or anywhere in this country is left without a voice or the support that they need to thrive.

4.59 pm

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. Not being able to articulate one's thoughts verbally is, I suspect, not something that many of my parliamentary colleagues suffer with, but unfortunately it is the truth for hundreds of thousands of people in this country.

Speech therapy is not limited to children, as was mentioned by the hon. Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson), who I am grateful to for bringing this debate to the Chamber. There are countless adults in need of speech therapy services. Those include stroke survivors who are relearning how to speak—which is why it is such a pleasure to speak with Chris, who is here in the Public Gallery and is a true hero in the footballing world—as well as people with cleft conditions or those living with dementia. I thank the hon. Member for Lichfield for spotlighting long covid, because that is an issue that will be with us for many years to come.

The need in the adult sector is significant, but today I will focus on children because they represent our future, and without intervention at a critical stage the challenge they face will only grow. I have not had the pleasure of meeting Mikey, but I would like to know if this resonates

with him. Imagine a child starting school for the first time: friendship and bonds are made, and classmates are eagerly raising their hands, making friends and joining in chatter in the playground, but the child remains silent—not because they do not want to speak, but because they cannot. Their words are locked away and their thoughts are trapped. Thousands of children face that challenge daily and they are getting left behind, not because they lack potential but simply because they lack support. That is the silent struggle of thousands of children in our country.

Speech, language and communication difficulties are not just a health issue but a life one—they affect mental health, academic success, employment, and relationships. They are a barrier to participating fully in our society. Over 369,000 pupils in England were identified as having speech, language and communication needs in 2023-24. That is a staggering 64% increase since 2015, and yet, as of November 2024, more than 65,000 children were waiting for speech and language therapy, with nearly half waiting for over 12 weeks. The impact of that delay cannot be overstated. Worryingly, in socially deprived areas, upwards of 50% of children start school with impoverished speech, language or communication. Those delays snowball, creating challenges in literacy, learning, and most importantly, social integration.

It is concerning that research shows that more than 60% of young offenders have difficulties with speech. Is that the postcode lottery that the hon. Member for Lichfield talked about? The cycle of disadvantage starts with communication barriers, and it can end in exclusion, isolation or even worse. It is now a crisis. Speech and language therapists are overstretched, underfunded and working in systems that fail to meet the demand of local needs. However, there is a solution within reach.

Speech and language therapy changes lives. It is not about helping children speak clearly; it is about unlocking their potential. It gives them tools to learn, connect and thrive. It breaks down barriers to education and opportunity, and with timely intervention children can overcome those difficulties and go on to succeed in school, work and life. In 2015, the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists commissioned research to estimate the benefits of speech and language therapy compared to the cost of not doing it. The results showed that for every £1 spent on speech and language therapy, £2.30 in healthcare savings was delivered. Speech therapy is not a cost; it is an investment in the future of our society. We need urgent action.

First, we need increased investment to reduce waiting times and to ensure every child, no matter their background, gets the support they need. Secondly, we need improved workforce planning that addresses the shortages of speech and language therapists across all sectors—health, education, social care and justice. Thirdly, we need universal proactive provision, so that support is fully preventive, rather than reactive and limited. Those changes align with the Government's stated priorities. Communication is fundamental to all areas of public policy—it touches economic growth, an NHS fit for the future, safer streets and breaking down barriers to opportunity.

This is the moment to decide whether we will act. Will we allow those children to struggle in silence, or will we give them a voice? Lastly, I urge the Government to meet with Mikey Akers and the Royal College of

Speech and Language Therapists to discuss workforce retention and development. Let us invest in our future and ensure that every child has a chance to be heard, to succeed and to thrive.

5.4 pm

Sarah Smith (Hyndburn) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) for opening the debate, and I pay tribute to Mikey. I have been privileged to work with young people for many years, putting them at the heart of leading change, and it is always brilliant to see that happening. I congratulate Mikey, and hope that he will start to see actual results. We have heard that he has been working on this for a long time, and is perhaps frustrated that he has not seen change happen more quickly.

It is not an exaggeration to say that high-quality speech and language services can transform lives because supporting a person to communicate can open a whole new world of opportunity for them. As we have heard, communication is an essential aspect of life for all ages, including for adults who have experienced major setbacks due to medical events. However, I will focus my comments on the need for excellent speech and language provision for children and young people.

A vital part of this Government's mission is to break down barriers to opportunity for all children, and to help ensure that a record number of children start school ready to learn. A key component of our approach will be better identification of those children who may need additional support with their language and speech development. Speech and Language UK has found that 1.9 million children struggle with talking and understanding words, which demonstrates the scale and importance of this issue. I hope that the investments that this Government are making into increasing the availability and standard of pre-school childcare and into family hubs will lead to more opportunities to support young children with their early language development, at an earlier stage. However, many of those children will need access to high-quality speech and language therapy to help them progress, and their families need support to know how best to encourage and aid their child's development.

I recognise that, often, parents feel left out in the cold and unclear on how they can best support their children when they face challenges. That support will be crucial to ensuring that no child is left behind in their educational progression because we know that language skills are the foundation for literacy development and further learning. I was delighted to see at first hand, in schools that I have worked with, the impact of the decision already taken by the Secretary of State for Education to fund a further year of the Nuffield Early Language Intervention programme. I hope that the Education team will continue to support that as one means to tackle this bigger issue. I ask the Minister, how are the Government further working alongside education colleagues? We know that it is by working together that we can enable children who need formal speech and language therapy to access it without the horrifically long waiting times that they currently experience.

There are specific challenges within the north-west, and it is no surprise that the majority of constituencies with a high level of signatories to the petition are in that region. In the north-west, in November, around 45% of

[Sarah Smith]

children and young people who were waiting for speech and language therapy had been waiting for over 12 weeks, compared with 28% of those on the waiting list in the east of England. The latest available figures show that 2,672 children and young people in the Lancashire and South Cumbria integrated care board area were waiting for speech and language therapy. That is a damning statement on the inheritance that we received from the Opposition, and that inheritance is further demonstrated by their Benches being almost empty for this debate. Earlier today, we heard the shadow Secretary of State for Education, the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), make a big noise in the Chamber, but she did not take seriously the challenges that the Opposition have left us and how we can tackle them.

The regional disparity is adding another level of disadvantage to children growing up in my constituency of Hyndburn. Like all children, they deserve to be supported to learn. It is important that we are careful, when we speak about children with special educational needs and disabilities, not to suggest that their educational performances or communication skills are due to some internal difference or lack of ability: it is the systems and structures around them that we must fix to make sure that every child and young person has the same access to opportunities to fulfil their potential.

It is important that we provide wraparound support for families so that the Government can make better use of standard two-year check-ups to unlock pathways to support. Time and again, I hear of children and families in my constituency who are on pathways for not just weeks or months but years, without access to the education, health and care plan that they might need or the wraparound services intervention required to make sure that a child has the best possible chance in life. It is welcome that the Government's mission to build a health service fit for the future will look to design a system that meets the changing needs of our changing population, but can the Minister share more about how speech and language services will feature in the current national conversation on the 10-year strategy?

Effective speech and language interventions can reduce the need for more intensive and costly healthcare services down the line, and as hon. Members have mentioned they have a significant positive return on investment in the long term. Investing in early screening and diagnostic services will help identify speech and language issues at a young age and allow for more effective interventions. Effective intervention does not just help young people to access language and communication skills but helps with their confidence and the ability to make friends and start school with their best foot forward.

I know that Ministers across Government appreciate that there is a crisis affecting the SEND education system. We have had a 140% increase in the number of children and young people with EHCPs, but outcomes have stagnated. More money has been put in, but we are not seeing better results for the children impacted. That is why I welcome the commitment that this is not just about investment but the right reforms.

I would like to ask the Minister about closer working relationships with education professionals—not just how it happens at the top of Government but on the ground. Is there an opportunity with the schools rebuilding

programme to look at the co-location of education, health services and therapy and make sure that they are built into the design right from the start? The headteacher leading on the rebuilding of Hyndburn Academy is open and keen for this thinking, so it would be great to hear the Minister's views as to how that will be rolled out nationally.

There are many wonderful examples of inclusive schools, but many parents have felt forced to seek an EHCP for more specialised speech and language support. Has the Minister made an assessment of how a focus on speech and language specialised support as well as inclusion in schools could create a system where parents do not always have to go through a formal written process to secure the resources they need? That might tackle the huge challenges we face in that part of the system. We cannot solve the problems in the SEND system without increasing support for children struggling with speech and understanding words.

My comments have focused a lot on language development and formal education, but I have had the immense privilege of knowing children who are non-verbal but wonderful and profound communicators. Communication comes in many forms. That is why I spoke about the systems and structures we facilitate around our children to ensure that every child and young person is given the opportunity to thrive. No child should be held back from the strong social participation, relationships, learning and wellbeing that can be forged with the right support.

5.12 pm

Mr Connor Rand (Altrincham and Sale West) (Lab): I echo the congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) on introducing this important debate, and to all the campaigners who work tirelessly on this issue. I thank everyone who signed the petition, especially the 124 people in my constituency of Altrincham and Sale West: we contributed more signatures than any other constituency. That reflects the great number of conversations that I have had on this issue with local residents since being elected.

Other Members have spoken powerfully about the fundamental nature of communication to human life. It is clear that speech and language therapy can be transformational for those who experience it—approximately 76% of people who have had therapy say that it has materially improved their life—but it is a service that is far too hard to access. NHS England figures show that in September last year, over 64,000 children were on a waiting list for speech and language therapy, and 41% of them were waiting more than 18 weeks.

In my local NHS trust, there are about 154 speech and language therapists working full time. If we speak to any family with a relative affected by a communication or language difficulty, they will tell us that that simply is not enough. I have spoken to many school leaders locally, especially primary leaders, who are having to make stretched budgets stretch even further to fill in the gaps. The picture we face is stark and reflects the huge crises in our national health service and our special educational needs system.

In 2023, a report by the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists identified significant failings over many years in planning for the speech and language

workforce. Alongside significant cuts to early intervention services under the previous Government, those failings were reported as driving factors behind the waiting lists for therapy, which in turn piled pressure on other parts of the system and ultimately resulted in a demoralised workforce leaving the job they love and in the public going without the support they need. Ofsted, the Education Committee and the Care Quality Commission have all published similar reports, which should frankly have set alarm bells ringing in Government, but the truth is that not enough has been done.

Neither funding nor the numbers of speech and language therapists have kept up with the 64% increase in the number of children identified as having communication needs since 2015. Tragically, with adults, we have seen a steady decline in the amount of speech and language therapy received after a stroke, and effectively no dedicated adult service for those with long-term speech conditions. The challenge for this Government is that we must reverse these trends, not just because it is absolutely the right thing to do, but because improving access to speech and language therapy is essential to this Government's missions for change, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Sarah Smith) outlined. Whether that is breaking down barriers to opportunity in education or getting the NHS back on its feet, giving people the support to communicate effectively is critical.

Given the impact that speech and language therapy can have on giving people the ability to return to work, it is hugely important to our national effort to boost economic growth. I know that some important steps have been taken, and taken quickly, by this Government, not least the record funding increases set out for the national health service in the Budget. I know that there is no ringfenced central funding for speech and language therapy and that service delivery is in the hands of the integrated care boards, but I would like to know from the Minister, if possible, what work the Government are doing with ICBs to ensure that that extra funding feeds through the system and is being felt by individuals affected by communication and speech issues.

If possible, I would also like the Minister to address how the Government will improve the planning for the whole speech and language therapy workforce and what provision there is for that in the NHS workforce plan, which I know the Department of Health and Social Care is currently looking to update. That is desperately needed across our national health service. Finally, I will be extremely grateful if the Minister sets out the progress in delivering early language support for every child pathfinder project, so education settings can increase their ability materially to support speech, language and communication development.

These are big challenges for the Government to address, but that is why Labour Members like me have been sent here. We were elected on a mandate of changing and rebuilding our public services, so that they can be there for those who need them. We should never lose sight of the role that restoring speech and language therapy provision must play in the driving missions of this Government.

5.19 pm

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Thank you for your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, which my hon. Friend the

Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) introduced on behalf of the Petitions Committee. I thank Mikey for campaigning to bring this really important matter to this place.

I cannot miss the opportunity to say that I am delighted to see Chris Kamara in the Public Gallery. I am a Stoke MP, and my twin sister is a massive Stoke City fan, so she will be most envious that she is not in Westminster Hall today.

I want to emphasise the importance of speech and language therapy in delivering on our Government's ambition for childhood development and in supporting children with special educational needs. Ten per cent of all children and young people have a diagnosed long-term speech, language and communication need. We must invest in such services so that those young people are not held back in school and can communicate confidently with their peers.

Early language development promotes positive outcomes later in life, but in disadvantaged areas such as my constituency, about half of children start school with delayed language skills or diagnosed speech, language and communication needs. Speech and language therapists provide vital support in clinical settings to children with diagnosed complex needs and SEND. They also deliver universal programmes in early years settings, but sadly those programmes have been decimated by funding cuts in recent years.

Across Stoke-on-Trent and Kidsgrove, our local team at the Midlands Partnership University NHS foundation trust and organisations such as Stoke Speaks Out and Thrive at Five work incredibly hard to support our children, but sadly I have heard repeated concerns from local service providers about insufficient funding, rising demand and difficulties with recruitment and retention. Investment has simply not kept pace with the increase in the number of children with increasingly complex needs and SEND. I was surprised to learn that in Stoke-on-Trent an average of 269 children are allocated to a single therapist's caseload at any point in time. That is simply not acceptable.

Our children and young people deserve to be able to access clinical services when they need them, but too often that is not the case. In 2024, 41% waited longer than 18 weeks for therapy—the longest waiting list across paediatric services. Under-investment has impacted accessibility and waiting times for clinical services and has hollowed out our local preventive services. Scarce resources are being used to meet statutory requirements and deliver specialist services, and we have seen significant cuts to universal programmes that support children in early years settings to meet their developmental milestones.

We know that universal programmes have a very positive impact on children's outcomes. Early intervention can prevent children from developing more complex needs and can reduce the need for referrals to more specialist services in the future. That is why we need more programmes such as Every Child a Talker, Thrive at Five and Stoke Speaks Out, which have delivered excellent support to our families across Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire.

I am delighted that our Government have committed to a new target. We want 75% of our children to achieve a good level of development at five. The first three years of a child's development are critical to their brain development.

[David Williams]

I stress the importance of investment in speech and language therapy to deliver on that mission, and our plans to reform the SEND system. I urge the Minister to listen to the calls for investment to tackle the long waiting lists faced by people in my constituency, and the calls to invest in preventive services.

5.23 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Vickers. I thank the Petitions Committee for securing this important debate and my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) for introducing it; I associate myself with his words on Holocaust Memorial Day. I also congratulate Mikey on starting the petition and on his impactful campaign.

Speech and language therapy is a vital service that supports children and adults with the development of speech and assists those who have difficulties in eating, drinking or swallowing. As Chair of the Education Committee, I will focus my remarks on access to speech and language therapy for children and young people.

Speech and language are vital building blocks of communication. Children who face barriers to developing speech and language early in life, for a wide range of reasons, can face significant difficulties. Poor communication skills reduce participation in education and can lead to frustration and challenging behaviour or withdrawal and school avoidance. For children whose needs relate to a difficulty in eating, drinking or swallowing, good and timely speech and language therapy can make the difference between being able to attend school or nursery safely or not.

I know the difference that speech and language therapy makes in my own family. When my oldest daughter started to learn to speak, it became apparent that she was really struggling to say particular sounds and that her inability to differentiate between sounds, because of her difficulty in pronouncing some of them, was having a consequential impact on her ability to read. We were able to seek advice from an open access speech and language therapy clinic at our local health centre, which provided a wealth of advice and some helpful exercises that we could support our daughter to do at home. The clinic was available to us whenever we needed it, and my daughter was able very quickly to overcome the challenges that she faced. I am pleased to report that she is now a 19-year-old who is nothing but forthright in her ability to communicate with everybody.

Open-access services such as the clinic that we were able to access are now extremely hard to find. There is a shortage of speech and language therapists. Children who need speech and language support face long waiting lists in many parts of the country. That is a huge problem, because accessing timely support has a significant bearing on the impact that a speech and language difficulty can have in the long term. Issues that can be quickly addressed in very young children, for example, can become much more challenging to overcome with the passage of time. Early intervention saves money and delivers better educational outcomes.

Speech and language therapy sits at the junction of several parts of the public sector. Needs are often identified in nurseries or schools; local authorities have

a statutory responsibility for special educational needs and disability support; speech and language therapy is an allied health profession commissioned often by the NHS, but sometimes by local authorities and schools directly, and is often based in community settings. This complexity and the lack of a clear single pathway of commissioning services are among the contributory factors to the current shortage and the geographical disparities in the availability of speech and language services.

I welcome the Government's recognition of the importance of speech and language development in children and the commitment from the Department for Education to roll out the evidence-based NELI—Nuffield Early Language Intervention—programme in reception classes across the country. Expanding the availability of targeted support to help people who have speech and language difficulties to catch up will undoubtedly make a difference, but we know that the earlier a speech and language difficulty is identified, the better, not least because sometimes a speech difficulty is the first indication of wider special educational needs. The earlier a problem is identified, the easier it can be to address it. The Government recognise this, but there is currently no clear plan to expand the availability of speech and language therapy in early years and community settings.

The early years sector is diverse and disparate. There is a need for clarity on expectations, commissioning pathways and professional development to ensure that very young children can access speech and language therapy as soon as a need is identified. The fact that it is not compulsory for children to be in a formal setting until the age of five underlines the importance of community-based support in children's centres, family hubs and health centres, so that parents and carers can access support readily when they need it.

Adjusting the workforce challenges within speech and language therapy will also require intervention from the Government to make more training places available and to encourage those who have left the profession to return. I hope that the Government will produce a workforce plan for all the professions related to SEND support, so that professional expertise and support will be there for children and families who need it.

More widely, we have a SEND system that is failing children and their families across the country, with far too many children unable to access SEND support in school, waiting far too long for an EHCP and often finding that, when they get an EHCP, it cannot be fully delivered. Since the Minister for Care is responding to this debate today, I take the opportunity to highlight that when I speak with parents, teachers, local authority officers and others who are responsible for delivering SEND support, they very often say that, "within the EHCP, the H is too often absent". They struggle to get the NHS to the table and there is very weak accountability in the levers that can force it to do so. I ask the Minister to look in detail at the issue, and to work with his colleagues in the Department for Education to ensure better collaboration between Health and Social Care and Education, in the best interests of children with special educational needs and disabilities.

Finally, I take the opportunity to plug the Education Committee's recently launched inquiry on special educational needs and disabilities. As a Committee, we recognise the vital role of speech and language therapy

within the wider network of services that contribute to effective SEND support. Our call for evidence on SEND is open until 6 February. I encourage all right hon. and hon. Members who have an interest in SEND services or challenges within their constituencies to encourage their constituents to submit evidence to our inquiry, including those who have experience of speech and language therapy, so that we can hear the widest possible range of evidence and make recommendations to the Government that can deliver a transformation in SEND services across the country.

5.31 pm

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I thank Mikey for being here today and for all his hard work to get to the point of having a debate. It takes a lot of campaigning to get as many people involved in a petition as he has done, and that is a fantastic tribute to him.

I also thank the hon. Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) for introducing the debate. I was struck by his comment that speech therapy is not just a treatment, but a lifeline. That was certainly brought home to me recently. In Winchester last year, I visited an aphasia support group. Its members meet every couple of weeks and they all have speech issues caused by various types of brain damage, which could be caused by a brain injury, a stroke, a brain tumour or dementia. They told me that aphasia affects about 350,000 people in the UK. Jez Hodgkinson, who is part of the group, said:

“Learning to live with aphasia takes hard work, luck and lots of support—and this isn’t helped by the lack of knowledge of the condition. I’d never actually heard of aphasia until I had a stroke so hence it’s so important to share our stories both inside the group and with the wider public—including those with a voice in parliament.”

I also have personal experience of living with my father who had a series of mini-strokes and then dementia, and really struggled to communicate. He knew what words he wanted to say but he could not reach for them. It made communication difficult, and especially did not help a very independent farmer who had quite a hot temper at the best of times.

All people who have difficulty communicating, whether it is the result of a hearing impairment, special educational needs or conditions such as strokes and Parkinson’s, have the right to participate in society fully and independently. Too often, those rights are not fully recognised. Everyone has talked about how fundamental it is for us to be able to communicate, because we are a social species; we function because we can communicate. Even with my veterinary background, I understand how fundamental that need is. Puppies communicate primarily by body language; when they have had their ears cut off or their tails docked, they lose that ability to communicate and cannot socialise—they get psychological issues or behavioural problems that last for their entire lives. And the issue is so much more important for humans who need to communicate with friends and family, access services and interact with strangers on a regular basis to be able to work and get an education. Everyone deserves independence and the opportunity to flourish, with them and their families supported so that they can express themselves and communicate with ease in the most comfortable way for them.

Speech and language therapy can make a life-changing difference to the people it supports. It is a vital and overstretched service. In recent years, demand has risen at a faster rate than the number of therapists or the support they can offer. That desperately needs to be addressed. By improving outcomes, speech and language therapy can help to deliver better care, and actually save money for other parts of the NHS. We heard about supporting people who are unable to swallow properly; that can have a significant impact on reducing repeat chest infections. The hon. Member for Leicester South (Shokat Adam) mentioned how every £1 spent on speech therapy can save £2.30 of NHS costs. When people ask how we can afford to do this, we have to ask, “How can we afford not to do this?”

Children and adults are waiting far too long for the speech and language therapy they need. As the hon. Member for Lichfield has already said, it is a postcode lottery; there are huge differences in outcomes depending on where someone lives. Helping people to swallow, eat and communicate is an essential service, and everyone should be able to expect that support if and when they need it.

We, the Liberal Democrats, are pressing for the NHS 10-year plan to address specifically the inadequate access to these speech and language therapies, and how that will be improved. We want the Government to develop a workforce strategy to end the chronic shortage of speech and language therapists, so that everyone can get the support that they need.

As a slight aside, but on a related note, we have also long campaigned for more support for those communicating through British Sign Language. We have campaigned for it to have equal official status to the UK’s other languages, and we are campaigning for free access to sign language lessons for parents of deaf children.

I visited St Peter’s primary school in Winchester recently. The headteacher was discussing how, since the covid pandemic, they had noticed a sharp rise in pupils struggling to communicate, as their speech and language had not developed as quickly as it did before the pandemic. We need to remember that it is not just people’s educational needs that are affected—both by covid and by speech and language challenges—but their entire social development and friendship groups as well.

We are really pleased that this issue has been highlighted, and that we have had this debate today. I urge the Minister to push forward on this issue as fast as possible.

5.37 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Vickers. I congratulate the hon. Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) on his introduction to today’s debate. I also particularly congratulate Mikey Akers, who I understand introduced this petition, for the work that he has done in raising awareness of verbal apraxia—work that will no doubt help people right across the country. I know that he has been working with my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) on this issue too, and no doubt that will also be helping people. I also welcome Chris Kamara to the Gallery. He is doing great work on raising awareness too. The more awareness we raise, the better it will be for everybody, and the easier it will be for people to be treated for the conditions they have.

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

As we have heard today, speech and language therapists have a wide range of skills for people of all ages. The issue is much bigger than speech itself. It also includes swallowing, from newborns with developmental delay to the elderly, who may be struggling to swallow after a stroke. It is about communication, feeding issues, and specific sound delays—a stammer. Speech and language therapists are involved in a huge amount of work.

I have seen in my own family the work that speech and language therapists do, with one child unable to say “s”, and having speech therapy to try and encourage her to do so—one of her younger siblings, having spent much time attending these appointments, consequently learned to say “s” about 18 months earlier than she was supposed to.

I also had a child with a stammer who was treated successfully. I learned from that that the whole family needs to be involved in treating the child, and I am grateful for the support that I got from the NHS speech and language therapists for my family. When I went along, particularly with the child with the stammer, I learned that the parent, and indeed the whole family, had to play games every day. I had to learn to play with my child without asking her any questions, which is a lot harder than it looks.

I learned about the importance of sleep and that early therapy is better. I remember the speech and language therapist likening the condition to a record getting stuck in a groove on a record player. If someone got stuck in a particular groove, the more times the disc went round the deeper it got and the harder it was to jump out, so it is important to ensure that speech and language therapy is instituted as early as possible to make it easier to treat the patient.

I want to ask the Minister about parent resources. If early is better, special guidance on aspects of treatment and management even before the patient sees a speech and language therapist would be helpful. I saw that Hereford and Worcestershire health and care NHS trust had some very good online resources for parents and what they can do to help their child with a speech or language condition.

The priority of reducing overall waiting times for community services was reflected in NHS England's operational planning guidance for 2024-25. Local systems across England were asked to develop the comprehensive plan by June 2024 to reduce the overall waiting times for community services, including reducing waits over 52 weeks for children's community services. The waiting lists have reduced from roughly 76,000 last July to 63,000 at the end of last year, which is still too long. Will the Government focus on trying to reduce the waiting lists still further? And does the Minister have a target in mind for next year to see how far he would consider it successful to have reduced those waiting lists?

What is also clear and has been reflected in many hon. Members' speeches is that the demand for speech and language therapy has gone up. According to Department for Education data, in 2023-24 370,000 pupils had a speech, language and communication need in England—an increase of over 64%, from 225,000 in 2015-16. That is not related to an overall increase in the number of school-age children, so why is that the case?

One could perhaps consider that more people are aware of the conditions, thanks to active campaigns. That is a good thing because people are getting referred earlier and treated earlier. But it also would appear that the number of children affected by speech and language conditions has gone up. The Minister and his Government have talked a lot about prevention being better than cure, and I agree with that. So what work has he done to look at the causes of the rise in speech and language difficulties?

As I was researching causes, I came across the issue of screen time. What is the effect of screen time? It reduces imagination, peer-to-peer speaking and verbal problem solving. It is also a solitary rather than truly social activity. We know that children are spending more and more of their time online, particularly young children. Families are smaller. Does that mean that people have less time to interact with other children? We have an increase in the number of bilingual children. Although that in itself does not cause speech and language problems, it can cause temporary language mixing at younger ages, and in some cases slower vocabulary acquisition in early years. What is the Minister doing to find the cause of the rapid increase in the number of children with speech and language difficulties so that we can prevent them rather than waiting for them to occur and then treating them?

I also want to talk about the Nuffield Early Language Intervention, known as NELI, which was mentioned earlier. It is a teaching assistant-delivered programme that has been accessed by over 11,000 schools since the pandemic. It is known to improve the speech and language communication of the children who go through the programme by three months; the improvement is much greater for more disadvantaged children. Can the Minister commit to continuing to ensure that children have access to the NELI programme?

Pre-election, the Department of Health and Social Care worked with the Department for Education to ensure that young people with special educational needs and disabilities received the right support. The collaboration included working together to implement the SEND and alternative provision improvement plan, published on 2 March 2023. Those two Departments also worked together on SEND workforce planning and established a steering group to oversee the work, with a view to completing it by 2025. Will the Minister provide an update on the steering group's work and what plans there are to commission research into supply and demand for speech and language therapy?

In 2023 the Department for Education launched the two-year early language and support for every child pathfinder project with NHS England to improve access to speech and language therapy. Funding for that is due to run out this year, so can the Minister confirm whether it will be renewed to allow the project to continue?

The Government are also due to refresh the NHS long-term workforce plan this year. Back in 2023, that plan set out an ambition to increase allied health professional training places by 25% by 2031-32. However, the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists and others have highlighted that that is likely to cover only speech and language therapists in the NHS workforce, and the Minister also needs to address shortages in educational and criminal justice settings. Can he confirm what work he is doing with his colleagues across Government to ensure that is the case?

Many speeches today have been focused on the social speech and language needs of children, which is understandable, but in the Minister's wrapping up, will he talk about what work he is doing to support adults with speech and language difficulties or swallowing needs? Finally, we understand from the newspapers that many aspects of care across the NHS are now to be deprioritised, and Ministers are to focus on one specific target. While I would not expect the Minister to comment on any leaks, can he confirm that speech and language therapy will not see a reduction in real-terms resources?

5.45 pm

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) on introducing this important debate, and on the passionate, moving and powerful way in which he spoke, particularly about his mother. I would really like to thank him for sharing those personal experiences. I also thank every Member who has spoken today. We have heard really compelling accounts about access to speech and language therapy for both children and adults.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for giving way, and my apologies, Mr Vickers; I had to leave earlier for a ministerial appointment.

In 2018 my father suffered a stroke, and the staff at my local hospital, the George Eliot, could not do enough for him—they were absolutely fantastic. I know that my father stayed in hospital longer than he needed because that was the only way in which he could access the speech and language therapy that he needed, as well as the help to enable him to swallow. It was fantastic to see him recovering that speech because of their intervention. As he had served for nearly 50 years as a volunteer magistrate, it is wonderful to see him now being able to challenge my ideas and give his comments on my contributions in this House.

Last week, I held a consultation event in my constituency where a dietician told me that she felt there was not enough ability for her and her team, as well as speech and language therapists, to give help in the community. She was quite excited about our ideas for virtual wards and asked me, on her behalf, to plead with the Minister to ensure that we give recognition to putting more speech and language therapy in the community. I know that my dad would have been very pleased to receive that.

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): Order. Interventions should be brief—I was very generous.

Stephen Kinnock: I thank my hon. Friend for that wonderful example of the personal experience that so many Members on all sides of the House have of this service, which can be life-changing for so many people. I pay tribute to her father for coming through in the way that he has, and I also pay tribute to all those in the community care services. The care that he received was obviously vital and life-changing for him, and that is wonderful to hear.

My hon. Friend raises an interesting point on virtual wards. It is absolutely right that we build on the innovation and opportunities that they offer. Later in my speech I

will say a word or two on the three big shifts that we will put at the heart of our 10-year plan: from hospital to community, from sickness to prevention and from analogue to digital. I think the virtual wards are a great illustration of how we can bring those three seismic shifts together to transform our health and care system. I can tell my hon. Friend that the 10-year plan is the right forum and opportunity for that, and I encourage her and all Members to get involved in that plan, which can be accessed at change.nhs.uk. Hon. Members may also wish to organise roundtables and discussion fora in their constituencies to talk exactly about the kind of innovations that we are looking to bring to the fore.

It would be remiss of me not to pay tribute to Mikey Akers; he is an outstanding young man and truly an example to us all. Of course, I also pay tribute to Chris Kamara and the whole team campaigning with such vigour and verve on this vital issue. I would of course be delighted to meet Mikey, Chris and the team at a mutually convenient time to discuss the project and how to take it forward.

As our debate today has shown, speech and language therapists work with people of all ages, providing specialist care and support. Their work takes place across a range of different settings in health, care and education. It responds to a wide range of communication needs, from those of children whose speech is slow to develop to those of older people whose ability to speak has been impaired by illness or injury, for example as a result of Alzheimer's, a stroke or head injury. Speech and language therapists also support patients who have difficulties with eating, drinking and swallowing.

The variety of support that speech and language therapists provide means that they play a key role in a wide range of care pathways. A speech and language therapist is a core part of the multidisciplinary stroke rehabilitation team, providing long-term rehab for stroke patients. It is not just patients they support—a speech and language therapist also works with a patient's family or carers on how best to facilitate communication and support the patient, sharing their expertise to upskill the support network of the person they are caring for.

Another example of the work of speech and language therapists is the role they play in supporting autistic people. They can offer interventions to improve communication skills where needed. For individuals who are unable to speak, speech and language therapists can design alternative communication systems.

Moreover, as part of a wider multidisciplinary team, speech and language therapists also contribute to a young person's education, health and care plan. A therapist will carry out a detailed assessment of an individual's speech, language and communication abilities, which will help to determine the additional support they may need to access education.

However, it is the key role that speech and language therapy plays in care and support pathways that creates complexity in funding and commissioning models for it. In some cases, full care pathways are commissioned as opposed to individual services within a particular pathway, while in some areas community health services are commissioned using block contracts. Both these things create challenges in clearly identifying specific funding streams for specific services.

[Stephen Kinnock]

Speech and language therapy is generally commissioned locally by integrated care boards and in some cases by local authorities. Funding is allocated to ICBs by NHS England. The allocations process uses a statistical formula to make geographical distribution fair and objective, so that it more clearly reflects local healthcare needs and helps to reduce health inequalities. This process is independent of Government, and NHS England takes advice on the underlying formula from the independent Advisory Committee on Resource Allocation. NHS England is also continuing to work with ICBs to develop their financial plans.

NHS planning guidance sets priorities for systems, and the Secretary of State has confirmed that this key document will be published in due course—indeed, imminently. Each ICB will then commission the services they need for their local area, taking into account their annual budget, planning guidance and the wider needs of the population they cover. Local commissioners are responsible for ensuring that their offer is tailored to the local population and that their communities are able to access the specific support they need. NHS England continues to work with ICBs to develop their financial plans, to ensure that communities can access the healthcare support they need when they need it. A complex patchwork quilt of systems and processes needs to be gone through by the people who know best about what is required in their community—those at the coalface—to deliver the care that is needed.

That said, I reassure hon. Members that the Government are committed to funding the NHS properly. We recently provided a £26 billion boost for health and social care at the Budget through the policies and choices that the Chancellor laid out. We have been clear that funding must go hand in hand with reform, and we will ensure that every penny of extra investment in the NHS is well spent.

The community health services data plan, published by NHS England last year, goes some way to improving data about community health services. The plan sets out how the NHS aims to improve the quality and relevance of data, and the timeliness of its publication. It will improve our understanding of demand and capacity across community health services, including speech and language therapy, with high-quality data to generate helpful insight to shape interventions and improvements to services.

Data and clear funding lines are not the only challenge facing speech and language services. Our children and young people are stuck on waiting lists, some for more than two years. More than 65,000 children and young people were on a waiting list for speech and language therapy in November 2024. We know that more than 23,000 have been on those waiting lists for longer than 18 weeks. That is simply too long. Waiting times for adults are not as bad as those for children and young people, but there were more than 23,000 adults on waiting lists for speech and language therapy in November 2024.

We hear a lot about the increasing demand for speech and language therapy, and about the fact that our existing workforce are struggling to meet the increase in referrals—pretty much every hon. Member said that in the debate. The reason for the increase in waiting times is multifaceted. Although services are still recovering

from the pandemic, there has also been an increase in demand, and analysis from the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists shows that demand is increasing faster than the workforce are growing.

Speech and language therapy covers a broad spectrum of support. Therapists are often dealing with complex long-term cases, requiring a resource-intensive approach to supporting their patients, and referral pathways are often complex. Those referral pathways, and the services offered, also vary regionally.

As my hon. Friends pointed out, we are coming off the back of 14 years of failure, which have led to serious workforce challenges, and the reality is that we have a mountain to climb on recruitment and retention. The speech and language degree apprenticeship is now in its third year of delivery and offers an alternative pathway to the traditional degree route into a successful career as a speech and language therapist. We think that that has had a positive impact on recruitment, but much more needs to be done. We want to remove the barriers to training in clinical roles, which is why eligible students get a non-repayable grant of £5,000 a year. Further financial support is also available for childcare, dual accommodation costs and travel, but we know that that does not go far enough.

The training and retention of our talented NHS staff are absolutely key to our mission of rebuilding a health service that is fit for the future. A central part of the 10-year plan concerns our workforce and how we ensure that we train and provide the staff, technology and infrastructure that the NHS needs to care for patients across our communities.

This summer, we will publish a refreshed long-term workforce plan to deliver the transformed health service that we will build over the next decade and that will treat patients within the 18-week constitutional standard once again. We will ensure that the NHS has the right people in the right places, with the right skills to deliver the care that patients need when they need it. We must acknowledge that tackling this will take time, but we are committed to training the staff we need to ensure that patients are cared for by the right professionals and in a timely manner.

Community health services, and speech and language therapies in particular, speak to the three seismic shifts that will drive our 10-year plan: shifting healthcare from hospitals to communities, focusing on prevention, and embracing digital care. Effective, user-centred services are invariably delivered by multidisciplinary teams that are based in the communities they serve. The early language and support for every child—ELSEC—programme provides an example of different professions coming together to support children and young people, with local authorities, schools and the health and care system working together in the community. In our view, that is a potential building block for how our neighbourhood health service should work.

Nine regional pathfinder partnerships are trialling new ways of working to better identify and support children in early years settings and primary schools. We have asked the pathfinders to consider how to make the model sustainable after the project period. The therapy assistant roles have the potential to attract individuals to train to become speech and language therapists through the apprenticeship route. The ELSEC workforce model focuses on recruiting pre-qualification speech

and language therapy support workers into the workforce to improve the capacity and knowledge of staff who support children with emerging or mild to moderate speech, language and communication needs in early years and school settings.

That will be important, because we hear a lot about the challenges our workforce face in meeting the increasing demand for speech and language therapy. Across all community health services, increasing demand and workforce availability are frequently cited as the main reasons that systems are struggling to reduce waiting times and get on top of the demand. The interim programme evaluation is due to be published in February, at which point we can explore insights into the effectiveness of ELSEC delivery at a local level. Reporting data shows that therapy support teams have supported around 13,000 children so far, and just over 1,000 staff in settings have been upskilled in delivering interventions. That is an encouraging set of achievements, and I will continue to work with my ministerial colleagues and officials across my Department and the Department for Education to support this important programme.

I referred earlier to our ambition to build a neighbourhood health service. We are firmly committed to moving towards our vision for such a service, and community health services will be an essential building block of it—keeping people healthy at home and in their communities, and providing more preventive, proactive and personalised care. Later this year, we are going to trial neighbourhood health centres, which will bring together a range of services and will ensure that healthcare is closer to home and that patients receive the care they deserve.

We have heard about the importance of adequate funding and timely access to speech and language therapy services for children and adults with communication and swallowing needs. The importance of such services is not in doubt, nor is the life-changing impact that timely access to high-quality services can have, from helping a child to develop the right skills to engage with education to supporting adults to regain their ability to speak. Speech and language services are facing challenges, but sustainable, accessible and high-quality community health services are vital, and I will continue to work closely with NHS England, the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education on this critical issue.

6.4 pm

Dave Robertson: I place on record my thanks to all the hon. Members who have contributed to the debate, starting with the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti), who made an excellent contribution, as I think we would all expect. I congratulate him on his campaigning on this important issue. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge) for raising the story of her constituent Samantha, who I am sure will be watching the debate closely.

I thank the hon. Member for Leicester South (Shockat Adam) and my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Sarah Smith) for reminding us of the importance of supporting the next generation and all those who come after. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Rand) for raising the issue of unacceptably long wait times for speech and language therapy. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams) for highlighting the caseload faced by speech and language therapists in Stoke-on-Trent and the great county of Staffordshire. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for discussing the need for early intervention and the remarkable impact that it can have.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor) for the story of her father's experience in speech and language therapy. I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers), for his excellent contribution on the need to raise awareness around aphasia, which does not necessarily get spoken about enough in the community.

I thank the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), on behalf of His Majesty's official Opposition, for her considered remarks and for avoiding making the issue a political football. It is really important to highlight where we do agree, because there is often more agreement than people realise in this place. By working together, we can achieve those goals.

I especially thank the Minister for Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberafan Maesteg (Stephen Kinnock)—did I get that right?

Stephen Kinnock: Not bad.

Dave Robertson: Mam never quite got round to teaching me the Welsh that she speaks. I thank the Minister for his kind words about her and for outlining the complicated funding scenario that currently exists for speech and language therapy, along with the Government's desires for the future of this therapy as an example of the three shifts that the Government will introduce in the NHS, and the need for people to engage thoroughly with the NHS 10-year plan consultation as a vehicle to securing those changes.

I thank the Petitions Committee for allowing me to lead the debate. It has been a real pleasure, not least because my constituency was the fourth most supportive of the petition. Finally, on behalf of all hon. Members who have been able to contribute today, I say an enormous thanks to Mikey, without whose campaigning we would not be here discussing this issue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 657935 relating to speech and language therapy.

6.7 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 27 January 2025

DEFENCE

Fairey Swordfish Mark II

The Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry (Maria Eagle): I have today laid before Parliament a departmental minute describing a gift which the Ministry of Defence (MOD) intends to make to the Fly Navy Heritage Trust Ltd.

Since 1960, the Royal Navy operated a collection of MOD-owned historically important naval heritage aircraft with the Royal Navy Historic Flight. Five military-registered aircraft formed part of the Royal Navy Historic Flight, all of which had been maintained at some expense on the military register by the MOD. In January 2018, it was determined that, to allow greater freedoms in operation at reduced cost to the MOD, the Royal Navy Historic Flight should be disbanded, with its aircraft transferred to a civilian owner-operator. On 1 January 2020, four former Royal Navy Historic Flight aircraft were gifted to the Fly Navy Heritage Trust, with one, a Fairey Swordfish Mk II (LS326), retained while its original conditions of transfer to the Royal Navy were clarified.

The gift comprises a Fairey Swordfish Mk II (LS326) torpedo bomber aircraft, famous for the battle of Taranto and operations throughout world war two, in flying condition.

The total value of this gift is in the region of £495,000. The transfer of ownership is expected to be undertaken over the coming weeks.

The Fly Navy Heritage Trust Ltd, a charity operating under the umbrella of “Navy Wings”, has promoted the culture and heritage conservation of the Royal Navy’s Fleet Air Arm since the formation of the trust in the early ’90s. The trust has provided significant financial support to the renovation, repair and maintenance of heritage aircraft, operating them in direct support of naval service engagement aims.

The gifting of this final former Royal Navy Historic Flight aircraft to the Fly Navy Heritage Trust will allow this historically important aircraft to continue to be used in support of commemorative and educational aims in support of the Royal Navy and Fleet Air Arm for many years to come.

[HCWS389]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

National Infrastructure Planning

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): Sustained economic growth is central to the Government’s plan for change. It is the only way to increase the prosperity of our country and improve the living standards of working people.

Building and upgrading the right economic infrastructure—whether that be electricity networks, public transport links, renewable energy projects, roads, or water supplies—is essential to achieving that growth and delivering the Government’s long-term missions. Yet when it comes to infrastructure delivery, Britain today performs poorly against comparator countries. That needs to change.

That is why the Government moved quickly last year to lift the ban on onshore wind and expand the scope of the nationally significant infrastructure projects regime, enabling laboratories, gigafactories and data centres to be directed into the process. Last week, the Prime Minister announced plans to speed up the conclusion of legal challenges against development consent orders, including committing to legislate to ensure that meritless claims are given only a single permission attempt to seek a judicial review.

Yesterday, the Government published two interlinked working papers: the first, from His Majesty’s Treasury, set out the Government’s plan for their 10-year infrastructure strategy, which will be published alongside the spending review in June; the second, from the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, detailed our legislative proposals to streamline the consenting of critical national infrastructure—proposals which, subject to further work and the views expressed in response to the working paper, will be taken forward through the Planning and Infrastructure Bill. Copies of these documents will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

The proposals in the latter paper are intended to help deliver the commitment that the Government made in their plan for change to determine applications for at least 150 major infrastructure projects by the end of this Parliament. This target is more than the total number of decisions made under the NSIP regime since it was introduced in 2011, and nearly triple the 57 decisions made during the previous Parliament. Delivering this ambitious commitment will require decisive action on several fronts.

We are not, however, starting from scratch. The NSIP reform action plan, published in 2023, laid the foundations for a better, faster, greener, fairer, and more resilient NSIP regime. The action plan was broadly welcomed by infrastructure developers and communities, and the implementation of many of its proposals is already under way. These include enabling public bodies to recover costs for their services, and the provision of new services on the part of the Planning Inspectorate to enhance its advice to applicants and fast-track examinations.

We now want to move further and faster—which is why our working paper outlines legislative proposals to deliver two key objectives: clearer and stronger national policy; and faster decisions under the NSIP regime. With respect to national policy statements, the working paper confirms that the Government will implement recommendations from the National Infrastructure Commission to require that each NPS is updated at least every five years. This is essential given that some NPSs, such as those for waste water and hazardous waste, have not been updated for over 10 years.

The working paper also proposes a faster process for amending NPSs to reflect legislative changes, changes to current Government policy or relevant court decisions that have taken place between five-yearly updates. Both measures will ensure that national policy better reflects

the Government's priorities and provides stronger guidance to decision makers determining applications in line with the current national interest.

When it comes to ensuring faster and more consistent decisions under the NSIP regime, the paper outlines four proposals. First, we want to protect the consultation process while making it less burdensome. The time taken for applications to complete the pre-application stage has grown from 14.5 months in 2013 to 27.9 months in 2021, in part as a result of increased consultation and re-consultation on project proposals. Prescriptive statutory requirements and uncertainty about meeting them make developers cautious, resulting in gold-plating, which delays projects and confuses communities.

Our proposals seek to rebalance and improve the quality of consultation, with the aim of closing down issues and reducing the examination burden for all parties by:

- clarifying the requirements around consultation;
- introducing a new duty on all parties to identify and, where possible, narrow down any areas of disagreement during the pre-application stage;
- revising requirements around the contents of consultation reports to reduce their length and make them more accessible; and
- removing the requirement to consult 'Category 3' persons during the pre-application stage.

This also responds to the concerns raised by the NIC and stakeholders, and brings the statutory consultation requirements in the NSIP regime closer in line with other parts of the planning system.

Secondly, we want to further support the building of infrastructure after a development consent order is granted. The paper seeks views on how to ensure the system returns to the 'one-stop shop' it was originally intended to be, with more consents, licences, and permits granted in parallel with a DCO. We know that seeking these permissions post consent can delay construction by six to 18 months. Our paper invites contributions on whether this can be tackled through stronger guidance, or if an alternative model of seeking a 'deemed consent', replicating the approach of deemed marine licences, would have merit. We also outline proposals to streamline the process applicants need to follow to make factual corrections, or more substantive amendments to a DCO.

Thirdly, we consider ways to make the NSIP regime more flexible, so that it can accommodate the complexity and volume of projects expected over the coming years.

Building on feedback received from infrastructure stakeholders in response to our NPPF consultation, we propose to amend the Planning Act 2008 to allow the Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), to consider on a case-by-case basis if a project would be better determined via an alternative consenting route. This will enable projects which would otherwise be unviable due to disproportionate planning requirements to be brought forward, while in turn ensuring that the capacity of the NSIP regime is reserved for those projects that truly merit it.

One of the original objectives behind the NSIP regime was to enable all major projects across different sectors to follow a uniform consenting process. This has broadly been achieved; providing greater certainty for applicants on what are often one-off, unique and once-in-a-generation schemes is why the regime is widely supported by industry.

However, given the volume and complexity of projects set to come forward over the course of this Parliament, our paper explores whether the NSIP regime is sufficiently flexible to deliver robust and swift decisions in all instances. The paper outlines three examples where rigidity of process may be holding back better consenting outcomes, and seeks views on how best to address these concerns. It invites views on whether the best means of introducing greater flexibility would be via a general 'process modification power' to be used on a discretionary case-by-case basis; or whether it would be more appropriate to make a series of specific changes to tackle known issues via amendments to the Planning Act 2008, changes to secondary legislation or improvements in guidance.

Fourthly, we outline plans to increase the reach of statutory guidance in the system, to enable greater clarity over expectations for those involved in the consenting process, and to support implementation of our changes, particularly those linked to consultation.

Finally, the working paper also sets out our proposals for amending and updating existing transport consenting regimes to support quicker delivery of transport projects that are consented via the Highways Act 1980 and the Transport and Works Act 1992.

We look forward to receiving views on the proposals set out in the working paper, and to working with all those with an interest in streamlining the delivery of major national infrastructure.

[HCWS390]

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