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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Tuesday 28 January 2025

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Crown Court Backlog

1. **Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help reduce the backlog of cases in the Crown court. [902411]

10. **Bradley Thomas** (Bromsgrove) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help reduce the backlog of cases in the Crown court. [902422]

12. **Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown** (North Cotswolds) (Con): When her Department expects the Crown court backlog to decrease. [902424]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): The last Government left us with a record and rising backlog. Cases are taking years to be heard, and the number of victims dropping out at police stage has nearly doubled. We have taken steps to deliver swifter justice by increasing sitting days to a 10-year high and extending magistrates courts' sentencing powers, but we must go further. That is why I have commissioned Sir Brian Leveson to conduct a review of the courts, asking him to propose once-in-a-generation reform.

Mr Mohindra: We all want justice to be served as quickly as possible, and many of my constituents have contacted me recently with concerns about law and order. Given the various media reports about unused capacity in courts up and down the country, what is the Secretary of State's Department doing to ensure that every aspect of the justice system is working efficiently and at full capacity?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, and I share his concerns and those of his constituents—indeed, I see many such cases in my own constituency advice surgeries. We are working at pace to ensure that every bit of the criminal justice system is working at its maximum efficient capacity. That includes everything from police stage right through to sentencing in the courts. I am sure that he will be aware of the very strained situation we inherited. It will take some time for those changes to take effect, but we are driving forward system efficiency, and Sir Brian Leveson's review will give us a policy package with which to reform the system for the benefit of all victims.

Bradley Thomas: Constituents across Bromsgrove and the villages are sick and tired of violent criminality and lawlessness creeping over the border from Birmingham into our constituency. In the past year, Romsley Co-op and Wythall post office at Drakes Cross—both of which are on the northern fringe of my constituency—have been raided, and it is hard to believe that proximity to Birmingham is not a factor in that. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that prosecutions are pursued and custodial sentences are given in the first instance, to crack down on crime and make our area safe again?

Shabana Mahmood: Through our landmark review of sentencing, this Government are ensuring that sentencing is fit for purpose. That will ultimately put us in a position where we can crack down on reoffending, thereby cutting crime and the number of victims. I am not sure whether the hon. Gentleman is proposing carving out his part of the world from any other part of the country, but his argument about boundaries can apply to any part of the UK. That is why we need a functioning justice system for the whole of England and Wales, and that is what this Government are going to deliver.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: The Justice Secretary has said that she agrees with the old legal maxim that justice delayed is justice denied. We currently have a record backlog of 73,000 in the Crown courts; rape cases are not being prosecuted for three or four years; and, in particular, on any one day 25% of cases do not take place, for a variety of reasons. What is the Justice Secretary doing to speed up the whole system?

Shabana Mahmood: I agree with the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee that the backlog is far too high. He will know that, no matter what we do in terms of system efficiency and capacity, that backlog is projected to rise, because the demand coming into the system is particularly high and is itself rising. That is why I have asked Sir Brian Leveson to consider once-in-a-generation policy reform, so that we can make the legislative changes necessary to bring the backlog down. That is the change that is required, alongside system-wide efficiency and productivity.

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

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): The Secretary of State has announced two major reviews of the criminal justice system—the Leveson review and the Gauke review—and has said that, very impressively, they might report by the spring, which could be 1 March. There is a difference between reporting and taking action, so could she set out exactly when she expects the results of those two reviews to have a direct impact on case numbers?

Shabana Mahmood: The Chair of the Justice Committee is tempting me to pre-empt what the reviews will find. Those findings will, of course, dictate the pace at which change can then occur. He will be aware of the acute pressure on our prisons system, despite the emergency levers that I have had to pull—that has only bought us some time, as I have said when regularly updating the House. The sentencing review measures have to take account of our remaining problem with prison capacity.

Once the review has been published, we will move quickly to decide which recommendations to take forward. On the courts package, it is likely that any measures will also require legislative reform. Again, I will seek to move at pace on that, but that rather depends on the package of measures that Sir Brian Leveson ultimately recommends.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): The courts backlog is growing by 500 cases every month, and the Ministry of Justice has not set a date for when it will come down. Victims are being forced to put their lives on hold while they wait for a trial date, yet today at the Old Bailey half of all the courtrooms sit empty. The Lady Chief Justice has said that there are 4,000 additional sitting days available that could be used now. Who is the obstacle to resolving this? Is it the Justice Secretary, who is content for rape trials to be scheduled for as far off as 2027, or is it the Chancellor, and the Justice Secretary has just had rings run around her by the Treasury?

Shabana Mahmood: What an absolutely outrageous set of remarks! The right hon. Member completely forgets that, only six months ago, his Government were in charge. The Government of which he was part all but ran our justice system into the ground. I do not recall seeing him standing up and speaking about delays for rape victims, or indeed any other kind of victim, when he was on this side of the House. I am glad he has now realised that the system ought to try to put victims first. His critique would have more force were it not for the fact that this Government, having come to office only six months ago, have increased Crown court sitting capacity by 2,500 days.

Prison Officer Recruitment

2. Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): If she will make an assessment of the potential impact of the terms and conditions for prison officers' pensions on the recruitment of prison officers. [902412]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): May I take this opportunity to pay tribute to our prison staff for the essential work that they do? We are committed to improving the retention of experienced staff, because they are vital to keeping our prisons running. The Lord Chancellor has requested advice from officials on the pension age of prison officers, and we will continue to engage with trade unions as this is considered.

Seamus Logan: I thank the Minister for his warm words and encouraging remarks. He will know that in Scotland the "68 is too late" campaign by the Prison Officers Association enjoys cross-party and Scottish Government support, but the UK Government have refused to take action on this important issue. The current retirement terms ignore the reality of the frontline role that prison officers perform in prisons on a daily basis across the UK. It is a dangerous role, and no less so than that of firefighters or the police, who enjoy very different terms. Although justice is devolved to the Scottish Parliament, the pensions of Scottish prison

officers are controlled by the UK Government. So will the Minister or the Secretary of State commit the Government to reviewing the current prison officer retirement age of 68, and will he meet me to hear this case in more detail?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: As I have said, the Lord Chancellor has requested advice on this matter. We promote our strong employee total reward package as part of our recruitment. The terms and conditions of the civil service pension scheme are some of the best in the public sector, with a low employee contribution rate and a significant employer contribution rate of 28.97%. However, that does not mean it is not a right and proper question to ask, and if the hon. Member wishes to have a meeting with me, I am quite happy to meet him.

Support for Female Offenders

3. John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to support female offenders. [902413]

4. Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): What steps her Department is taking to support female offenders. [902416]

13. Paul Davies (Colne Valley) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to support female offenders. [902425]

18. Becky Gittins (Clwyd East) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to support female offenders. [902432]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): This Government's plan to support women is clear and ambitious: to reduce the number of women going to prison and to have fewer women's prisons. Our Women's Justice Board, which met for the first time last week, will support implementing this vision. I would also remind the House that, as the Minister responsible for youth justice, I have initiated a review of the placement of girls in custody, on which Susannah Hancock will report at the end of this month.

John Whitby: What family support is available for women at Foston Hall prison and young offenders institution?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: We know that family support is very important to women in custody, which is why grant funding has been awarded to the charity Parents And Children Together—PACT—to provide a resettlement family engagement worker in HMP Foston Hall, as well as in seven other women's prisons.

Jayne Kirkham: Gaie Delap, the mother of a constituent of mine, was recalled to prison just before Christmas, despite complying with her curfew conditions, because the Government's electronic monitoring services contractor could not fulfil its contract and find a tag to fit a frail 78-year-old woman. Can the Minister and the Secretary of State help to find a solution so that Gaie Delap can be released on her curfew, and so that women are not disadvantaged by the failings of the contractor's electronic monitoring system?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter. In this case the court's decision was to impose a prison sentence, and neither Ministers nor officials can intervene in sentences passed down by our independent courts. I understand the frustrations and can assure the House that we are working hard to find alternative approaches to ensure a secure resolution to this issue.

Paul Davies: There are more than 3,000 women prisoners in England and Wales—a number that the Ministry of Justice projects will rise to 4,200 by November 2027. Like many, I welcome the newly established Women's Justice Board, which will oversee efforts to tackle this issue and ensure a tailored approach to female offenders. What measures are being implemented to provide support through community sentences and residential women's centres?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: We are awarding £7.2 million for the upcoming year to community organisations and local areas that are already supporting women in the community. We are also employing options to increase the use of residential provision as an alternative to short custodial sentences. That includes engaging with the judiciary to ensure that the option of a community order with a residential requirement is considered in appropriate cases.

Becky Gittins: I welcome the launch of the Women's Justice Board, which is intended to reduce the number of women in our prisons, cut reoffending and better support our children. Will the Minister work with organisations from across the country, including North Wales Women's Centre, to ensure not only that their voices are at the heart of the work going on, but that they have the resources and support needed to support the most vulnerable in our society?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I pay tribute to women's centres across the country such as that in north Wales for the excellent contribution that their work makes. I agree that short custodial sentences can be problematic; they exacerbate women's underlying needs without allowing time for rehabilitation, and they separate mothers from children and mean that women are more likely to reoffend. That is why the Women's Justice Board—I am grateful to my hon. Friend for welcoming it—aims to increase the number of women supported in the community. The board will also look at how we can better support mothers with young children.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): Does the Minister accept that allowing biological men into women's prisons increases the risk to female offenders? Does he further accept that only biological women should be housed in women's prisons?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The vast majority of transgender prisoners are in men's prisons. We have continued the policy of the previous Government, but all policies are always under review.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Across the UK we face the bizarre and worrying reality that common-sense protections for women are being dismissed. For example, in Northern Ireland a motion to ensure that

biologically male prisoners who identify as women are held in male prisons has been opposed by many elected representatives in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and it is an issue that extends across the UK. What assurances—we do want assurances—can the Minister give that women's safety is taken seriously, and that they are guaranteed single-sex spaces in prisons, and other settings, free from biological males who identify as women?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: Safe spaces for women are crucial and a No. 1 priority in everything we do.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): The Minister refers to keeping under review the question of placing biological men in women's prisons. Will he speak to the Justice Minister in Northern Ireland and ensure that she reviews that policy? Only last week she was defending the very policy that puts women at risk from biological men who are claiming the right to be retained in women's prisons.

Sir Nicholas Dakin: That is a devolved matter, though clearly we are happy to speak to the devolved Government about any issues.

Southport Attack

5. **Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab):** What assessment she has made of the potential implications for her policies of the lessons learned following the Southport attack. [902417]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): I am sure that the whole House will join me in saying that our thoughts today are with the victims of these horrific crimes and their families. Last week we saw a measure of justice done, but over a number of years there was widespread state failure that meant that this attacker was not stopped. It is right that there will be an inquiry. The Ministry of Justice will play its full part, and I will ensure that any lessons for us are learned.

Liz Twist: When the tragedy of Southport happened, crucial details about the case could not be revealed to ensure that the trial did not collapse and the vile perpetrator did not walk away as a free man. However, some on social media were playing by different rules. Does the Secretary of State think that our contempt rules are fit for the modern world?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend raises an important point. The Government would not say anything that would risk collapsing this trial. The media followed the law, and so did everyone in this House, but the same was not true online. As the Prime Minister has said, this challenge clearly must be addressed. The Law Commission is reviewing contempt laws. We will look closely at that work and consider these issues in the round.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): But the information released shortly before the trial did not collapse the case. Had it been released in August, it might have had a dampening effect on those unhelpful voices on social media, might it not?

Shabana Mahmood: As I said in my previous answer, it is clear that the fast pace of the online world has some significant challenges for our present arrangements around contempt laws. The Government's approach, which was to do nothing that might risk collapsing the trial, was the right one. I hope that will have support across the House. It would have been in no one's interests to take any risks with the safety of the trial. As I have said, the online space poses some challenges for our contempt law arrangements, and the Law Commission is rightly looking into that.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Contempt of court laws are guardrails that ensure fair trials. Does the Justice Secretary accept that, as the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation has said, by failing to provide basic information to the public that has been disclosed in previous cases—information that would not prejudice a trial—the authorities created a vacuum in which misinformation spread? That misinformation could itself have been prejudicial to the trial. Does she agree that in an age when most people consume their news through social media, saying nothing is not cost-free? Will she commit to reviewing this issue now, rather than waiting for the Law Commission?

Shabana Mahmood: There will always be differing views among lawyers about what can and cannot be said. It is right that the Government took their own position and that we did nothing that could risk collapsing the trial. I agree with the shadow Secretary of State that the online world poses a significant challenge to our contempt laws. That is why that is already being looked at. As there is a piece of work already under way, I do not want to pre-empt where that could land. The Law Commission has a good track record of considering major law changes. Because of the inquiry and the fast-moving nature of these things, I will keep this area under close review myself.

Sentencing: Attendance of Offenders

6. **Anneliese Midgley (Knowsley) (Lab):** If she will bring forward legislative proposals to enable courts to order the attendance of offenders at sentencing hearings. [902418]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): By failing to attend their sentencing hearings, criminals add insult to injury and deny victims and their families a vital part of seeing justice done. Iusbe will be legislating to give judges the power to order attendance at sentencing hearings, and I will make it clear in the law that reasonable force can be used to make sure that happens. The Prime Minister and I met Cheryl Korbelt last week to discuss these proposals, and we will ensure that the families of other victims are involved before the Bill is put before the House.

Anneliese Midgley: I thank the Secretary of State for that positive response, and I thank her and the Prime Minister for meeting me and my constituent Cheryl Korbelt, the mother of Olivia Pratt-Korbelt, the nine-year-old who was tragically murdered in 2022. Cheryl is pleased that the Government have committed to implementing Olivia's law without delay. Can the Minister ensure that

Cheryl is involved in the development of this law, placing victims and their families at the heart of the justice system?

Shabana Mahmood: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work she is doing on behalf of her constituents. I was pleased to be able to discuss these matters with her. She is absolutely right, and it is crucial that we make progress in this area. We have committed to introducing that legislation before the summer, and I will, as I promised last week, consult Olivia's family and the families of other victims for whom non-attendance at sentencing hearings has caused problems.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): There are a small number of people who, through due process, appear in court and are convicted, but who decline to come up to the court room for sentencing. The Secretary of State has indicated her intention to move on this. Does she agree that the Government need to show a very robust approach, so that people who show disdain and contempt for the rule of law are shown that there is no room for manoeuvre and that they must and will appear in court?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Member is right. It is already expected that defendants will attend sentencing hearings, but we know that some take the opportunity not to face the families of their victims, which causes huge trauma to some of the families. We will clarify and put on a statutory footing the expectation of attendance at sentencing hearings, along with sanctions for dealing with offenders who still, despite being compelled to attend court—even through the use of reasonable force—seek to disrupt hearings.

Prolific Offenders

7. **Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con):** What steps her Department is taking to help tackle hyper-prolific offenders. [902419]

19. **Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con):** What steps her Department is taking to help tackle hyper-prolific offenders. [902433]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): The Government have inherited a situation where 10% of offenders account for 50% of all offences. We have also inherited an epidemic of shoplifting, the kind of antisocial crime that blights communities. I have commissioned David Gauke to review how sentences could be reformed to address prolific offending, reduce reoffending, cut crime and ultimately make our streets safer.

Mr Holden: I believe in second chances, and perhaps even more chances in some cases, but the excellent Policy Exchange report, "The 'Wicked and the Redeemable': A Long-Term Plan to Fix a Criminal Justice System in Crisis" found that hyper-prolific offenders—those with more than 45 previous convictions—are sent to prison on fewer than half of the occasions on which they are convicted of a subsequent indictable or either-way offence. Given that those people commit such high numbers of crimes, which usually affect our least affluent constituents, what consideration have the Government given to the

report's recommendations, particularly on introducing a mandatory two-year sentence for hyper-prolific offenders who are convicted of a subsequent indictable or either-way offence?

Shabana Mahmood: The right hon. Member raises an important point about an issue that blights communities across the country. I agree that we need a specific strategy for dealing with prolific offenders. Of course, different organisations use different definitions of what counts as a prolific offender or hyper-prolific offender, and that is why I have asked David Gauke to look specifically at this cohort of offenders in the independent sentencing review. The revolving door of prison and other types of sentences for them is clearly not having an impact. We must think about the interventions that will make the biggest difference to the largest number of those offenders, so that we can cut crime and have fewer victims.

Katie Lam: The Lord Chancellor rightly says that less than 10% of criminals account for nearly half of crime. I understand that a sentencing review is under way, but any decisions are for Ministers to make. Will the right hon. Lady please rule out here and now any possibility of allowing career criminals to avoid prison, even for short sentences?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Member will know that I am not going to pre-empt any of the findings of the sentencing review. The point of having an independent review is to allow for a look at all the issues in the round. I have made it clear that I am particularly concerned about the people who she rightly terms career criminals, and I am particularly keen to think about the interventions that could make the biggest difference, so that we can reduce this blight on our communities. That is a clear statement of intent from the Government, showing how seriously we take prolific offending, but the measures that we choose to take forward will be clearer once the sentencing review has reported.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): As the Secretary of State mentioned, the approach to managing hyper-prolific offenders is part of David Gauke's review, which could consider, for example, the wider use of GPS tagging and home curfew, but the Department has been undertaking its own assessment of the effectiveness of GPS tagging. Will the Government commit to publishing that review before or alongside the sentencing review, so that we can properly judge the merits of any proposed expansion?

Shabana Mahmood: As I have sought to do throughout this process, I will ensure transparency in the Government's approach when it comes to not just the emergency releases data, but other information that underpins future policy choices.

Dr Mullan: I did not quite hear a "yes", but I will take that as an encouraging commitment that the Secretary of State will publish the GPS tagging review ahead of any sentencing review. However, I am afraid that in Ministers' discussions of these issues, they risk losing sight of the fact that imprisonment also serves the

important purpose of punishing offenders in the interests of justice. Importantly, how will the Government decide whether any of David Gauke's proposals that they are minded to accept sufficiently punish offenders? How will that judgment be made before any recommendations are accepted?

Shabana Mahmood: I have said on many occasions in this House that I believe in punishment and in prison. Prison has a core role to play in the punishment of offenders. However, we must not run out of prison places. We must balance the need to punish and imprison people with interventions that expand the use of punishment outside prison. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman says, "Build more" from a sedentary position. We are. We are moving forward to solve the 14,000 prison place deficit left by his Government at the last election. This Government will build prisons, but as he knows, we cannot build our way out of the prison capacity crisis. We must consider other measures as well, but let me be clear: we will always seek to punish offenders, and prison will always have a place. This Government will build more prison places than the previous one.

Prison Capacity

8. **Luke Myer** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to increase prison capacity. [902420]

20. **Mark Swards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to increase prison capacity. [902434]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): We took immediate action to prevent the collapse of the prison system by implementing SDS40. We are building 14,000 new prison places and have published our 10-year capacity strategy. We have launched an independent sentencing review, so that we never run out of prison places again.

Luke Myer: I welcome the Government's action to increase prison capacity, but I am worried about youth custody. My local police force is particularly concerned that there is simply not enough space in the secure custodial estate. Many vulnerable young people are at risk of being exploited by organised criminal gangs. That is less to do with young offenders institutions and more to do with the lack of capacity in secure children's homes; that capacity has fallen since 2010. The number of Ministry of Justice contracted spaces is now around only 100 for the entire country, which is appalling. How will the Minister work with Department for Education to increase capacity, and protect vulnerable young people and our residents?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: We certainly do not wish to reduce capacity. I can confirm that we contract with local authorities' secure children's homes, and place children there. In 2010 we contracted for 191 beds, and currently we contract for 103. That correlates with a decrease in the number of young people in custody, mostly over the period when the Conservatives were in government. We do not currently intend to reduce overall capacity in the youth custody service estate, which comprises young offender institutions, secure

training centres, secure school and SCH beds. However, we are recommissioning secure children's home places, and cannot predetermine the outcome of that exercise, but I assure my hon. Friend that we will not run out of space.

Mark Swards: December's annual report on prison capacity stated that of the 88,400 prison places available, 97% are occupied, and it estimated that by 2032 we will have a prison capacity of around 99,000, but the central estimate of the number of prisoners stands at 104,100. What will this Government do to ensure that everyone who commits a crime worthy of prison is sent to prison?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I assure my hon. Friend that that will be the case. People who commit a crime worthy of prison will be sent to prison. As we have assured the House, we have plans to build 14,000 new prison places, as set out in our 10-year capacity strategy. In six months we have added 500 prison places. It took 14 years for the Conservatives to do that. We have also launched an independent sentencing review, so that we never run out of places again. Taken together, these measures will ensure that the country does not have more prisoners than we have space for in our prisons.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On building capacity, armed forces veterans concern me and many in this Chamber. They often live with post-traumatic stress disorder and have emotional memories and nightmares of what they have done in uniform for this country. What extra can be done to better look after our veterans in prison? They fight with demons every day. We have to look after them.

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The armed forces covenant affects us all. His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service ensures that veterans' issues are properly addressed with the individuals concerned, to give them the proper support that they need.

Support for Domestic Abuse Survivors

9. **Anna Sabine** (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): What steps she is taking to support survivors of domestic abuse and violence against women through the criminal justice system. [902421]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Sarah Sackman): This Government are committed to supporting victims and survivors of violence against women and girls. These are abhorrent crimes. We are therefore funding the rape and sexual abuse support fund to the tune of £26 million, as well as funding independent domestic and sexual violence advocates. We are also strengthening the powers of the Victims' Commissioner to improve accountability where those victims' needs are not being met.

Anna Sabine: A constituent of mine from Somerset was seriously sexually assaulted in another county more than two years ago. Despite reporting the assault in 2022, she has been given a court date in December 2025. She told me that the legal process, involving both the courts and the relevant police service, has been more traumatising than the incident itself. What better support can we offer women who find themselves stuck in these processes for such lengths of time?

Sarah Sackman: I am terribly sorry to hear about this case. We know that such cases are not isolated, which is why this Government are bearing down on the Crown court backlog; we are increasing the number of Crown court sitting days and increasing magistrates' sentencing powers to free up capacity in the Crown court, so that we can get swifter justice for victims. We are also investing in the victim transformation programme, through the Crown Prosecution Service, to provide precisely the kind of support that would benefit the hon. Lady's constituent, keep her engaged in the process, and bring those trial dates forward.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): It has been revealed that just 4% of rape and sexual offences reported to Lancashire police in the past year resulted in a charge or summons. What steps will the Ministry take to restore confidence in the criminal justice system for my constituents?

Sarah Sackman: My hon. Friend will know that this Government have a landmark ambition to halve violence against women and girls, and the criminal justice system has an important part to play in that. While setting that priority, whether it is for the CPS or our police, we want to drive charging decisions and drive up the conviction rate. Providing swifter justice for victims is going to require once-in-a-generation reform to bring down the Crown court backlog.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): In a recent written parliamentary question, I asked the Government how many domestic abusers there are in prison and what their reoffending rate is. Under the system this Government inherited from the Conservatives, they said that

"It is not possible to robustly calculate the number".

That is shocking, and is in part because there is no specific offence of domestic abuse in the law to properly reflect and recognise these crimes. My Domestic Abuse (Aggravated Offences) Bill would correct that loophole. When will the Secretary of State honour the commitment she made on "Good Morning Britain" to meet me to discuss my Bill and how we can better protect victims and survivors?

Sarah Sackman: Tackling domestic abuse is a priority for this Government. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 sets out a broad statutory definition of domestic abuse, which is improving our understanding of the wide range of behaviours that can constitute this abuse. While not constituting a stand-alone offence, domestic abuse is considered an aggravating factor routinely throughout our criminal justice system, and rightly so. That is the reason why that data is not collected, and that is the position we will maintain.

Prison Conditions

11. **Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): What steps she is taking to improve prison conditions. [902423]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): The right hon. Lady is right to raise this issue. We inherited historic under-investment in maintenance and a rising prison population. That is why we have already published our 10-year prison capacity

strategy and have plans to invest £220 million in prison and probation service maintenance in '24-25, and up to £300 million in '25-26.

Liz Saville Roberts: I rise as the co-chair of the justice unions parliamentary group. The emergency extra money to tackle the squalid state of our prisons is welcome, but given the £2 billion maintenance backlog, the reality is that the extra money will not touch the sides. This shows exactly why the privatisation of prison maintenance is a failed model. Private contractors may win contracts on low bids, but billions come in as extra cost later. Does the Minister seriously think that current prison maintenance providers offer good service and value for money to the taxpayer?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The right hon. Lady is right. We inherited contracts that were already well progressed; for best value and to move things forward quickly, we decided it was important to keep going with that process. However, I can assure the House that we have an open mind regarding private and public sector contracts in the future. The important thing is to get best value for money and get the job done.

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): Katie Allan was a beautiful and bright young woman, and would have been a constituent of mine but for the fact that, aged 21, she found herself, after a youthful stupid mistake, in Polmont young offenders institution, where she died from suicide. The fatal incident inquiry recently published into her death and the death of William Brown found that they both might be alive today were it not for a catalogue of errors by the Scottish Prison Service. The families of those who have lost children in such circumstances are campaigning for Crown immunity to be removed from prisons across Britain, so that there is proper accountability and more young lives are not lost. Will the Minister meet the families to discuss that proposal?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. He draws attention to a deeply disturbing case. I am very happy to meet him and the families concerned.

Public Confidence in the Justice System

14. **Mr Peter Bedford** (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): What steps she is taking to increase public confidence in the justice system. [902426]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): The last Government gave the public plenty of reasons to lose confidence in the justice system, including a rising courts backlog and prisons on the edge of collapse. We have already averted a crisis in our prisons, and have raised Crown court capacity to a 10-year high. We are now embarking on reform of our courts and our prisons. The work of restoring confidence in the justice system has started. It will, of course, take some time.

Mr Bedford: Jason Hoganson was wrongly released under the Government's early release scheme. Last week, he was convicted of assaulting his ex-partner just a day after he was freed under that botched scheme. Does the

Secretary of State agree that this shocking case, and cases like it, continue to undermine the public's trust and confidence in our justice system?

Shabana Mahmood: What undermines confidence in the justice system is running out of prison places, which is the inheritance the Conservative Government left for this Government. That is the mess that we are cleaning up. The hon. Gentleman will also be aware that the previous Government's end-of-custody supervised licence scheme was also an early release scheme, but without any of the measures on accountability and transparency, or the wider set of exclusions, that that we introduced with the SDS40 scheme.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): On Friday, I met my constituent Hayley Johns. She has given me permission to share her story in this place. Hayley was a victim of domestic abuse and actual bodily harm perpetrated by an ex-partner. I was absolutely shocked to hear her story. Her ex-partner was convicted for three years for his crimes. However, he is being considered for release after serving just three months. Does the Justice Secretary agree that given the legacy of the previous Government, we need to redouble our efforts, and the efforts of this Government, to improve confidence in the criminal justice system? Can I please ask her to take a personal interest in this case?

Shabana Mahmood: I will happily look at the facts of the case. Some of those numbers do not sound like they should be possible, but that could be down to specific factors relating to that case. If my hon. Friend writes to me with the details, I will make sure he has a full response.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Confidence in the criminal justice system can be achieved only if support for victims and survivors is adequately funded, but charities such as Victim Support, whose services I have personally benefited from, have said that for them, the hike in employers' national insurance contributions amounts to a real-terms budget cut of 7%. Victims need more support, not less. Will the Secretary of State fight to reverse that damaging cut and help restore victims' confidence in the criminal justice system?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the difficult fiscal inheritance for this Government, and that we have had to make some difficult choices. We received a good settlement from the Treasury at the last Budget, but it is not without its challenges, given the high demand in our system. He will know that we have protected funding for victims of violence against women and girls, including rape and sexual offences. We have sought to protect the most vulnerable victims when making decisions on our victims funding packages.

Grooming Gangs: Sentencing

15. **Sir John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to ensure that people convicted of charges related to grooming gangs receive adequate sentences. [902427]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): The right hon. Member raises a very important point on these heinous gangs and the crimes that they commit. The 20 recommendations made by Alexis Jay in her independent inquiry on child sexual abuse were ignored for far too long. The Government are working at pace to respond to them. We will also legislate to make grooming an aggravating factor in the sentencing of child sexual offences, ensuring that the punishment fits these horrific crimes.

Sir John Hayes: As in Bradford last week, where more of the grooming gangsters, largely of Pakistani origin, who raped white girls there and elsewhere were sentenced, the paucity of the Home Secretary's audit, whereby authorities mark their own homework, was made clear. Will the Justice Secretary agree to a wide-ranging review of these matters with statutory powers? Surely those whose lives have been ruined, and those whose lives may yet be ruined, deserve more than the weak reticence of people with power who refuse to face the facts.

Shabana Mahmood: I hope that the right hon. Gentleman and I have a shared objective in making it clear that there is a desire in all parts of the House to ensure that we face the full facts and that the victims of these heinous crimes receive the justice they deserve. I am sorry to hear that there are concerns in Bradford about the audit ordered by the Home Secretary; I will ensure that they are passed on to the Home Secretary, because, as the right hon. Gentleman will know, these matters fall directly within the purview of the Home Department.

Youth Justice System

16. **Alex Ballinger** (Halesowen) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the youth justice system in preventing reoffending. [902430]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): The number of children in custody has fallen significantly over the last decade, but those who are detained are now a more complex and violent cohort. Our turnaround programme provides funds that enable youth offending teams to intervene early to address child offending. Only 5% of children who completed such interventions received convictions in the first year of the programme, but we are continuing to take stock of what more can be done.

Alex Ballinger: Last week, tragically, 12-year-old Leo Ross was stabbed to death in Birmingham as he was returning home from school. His 14-year-old killer had been arrested several times for violent offences in the months running up to the killing. Can the Minister tell me what the Government are doing to reform the youth justice system to address and prevent the knife crime among our young people that is resulting in terrible tragedies like the one we saw last week?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I am deeply saddened by this tragic crime, and my thoughts and, I am sure, those of everyone else go to the family of Leo Ross. Such horrific events underline just how important it is to deliver our manifesto commitment to ensure that every young person caught in possession of a knife is referred to a youth offending team and that appropriate action is taken. We

are also piloting a new, more robust form of community punishment for children, involving mandatory GPS monitoring and intensive supervision.

Deputyship Applications

17. **Lisa Smart** (Hazel Grove) (LD): What steps she is taking to reduce processing times for deputyship applications by the Court of Protection. [902431]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Sarah Sackman): Applications for deputyship to the Court of Protection play a vital role when people need to be able to make decisions for loved ones who lack capacity. It is important to support those people through prompt and efficient processes. His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service has been implementing an improvement plan, driving down waiting times by recruiting more staff, enhancing judicial capacity, digitising application forms, and implementing a new case management system.

Lisa Smart: One of my constituents has contacted me to ask why he has been waiting nine long months for a decision from the Court of Protection on his deputyship application. He needs to secure the deputyship in order to make crucial decisions for a vulnerable loved one. Another constituent, in a similar position, waited for two months without any acknowledgement that his application was being looked into. Their experiences are not unique; solicitors and judges alike acknowledge the systemic delays plaguing the system. Does the Minister agree that such long delays in processing times are unacceptable, and what does she think is acceptable?

Sarah Sackman: I agree with the hon. Lady that such delays are not acceptable, and I am sorry to hear of the distress that this will have caused. It is right that we continue to invest in our improvement plan and continue to see progress with digitisation. Digitising the application forms is a first step, but we want to see end-to-end digitisation, which we know is resulting in decent progress and has sped up those times over recent months. There is more to do, and we shall do it.

Violence against Women and Girls

21. **Rosie Duffield** (Canterbury) (Ind): What steps her Department is taking through the criminal justice system to help tackle violence against women and girls. [902435]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Sarah Sackman): As I have said, the Government are committed to halving violence against women and girls within a decade. It is an important ambition, and the criminal justice system has a vital role to play in it. In November, we launched a pilot promoting domestic abuse protection orders in selected areas, and we have ambitions to roll that out further. We will also introduce independent legal advisers for adult rape victims, ensuring that victims have the legal support that they need and deserve.

Rosie Duffield: Last week, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner found that just 5% of reported domestic abuse results in a conviction. Does the Minister share my concerns that lengthy investigations into non-crime hate incidents are potentially diverting vital resources from the criminal justice system and from prosecuting actual violence against women and girls?

Sarah Sackman: The hon. Member is right to remark on the low charging and conviction rates for domestic abuse. We have an ambition to drive those up. That is why we are putting more funding and more prioritisation into this area and calling on our agencies, whether it is the police or the Crown Prosecution Service, to really focus on it, because right now we are not doing enough for women and girls.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): The tragic reality for many women who suffer domestic abuse and then have to go through family court proceedings on top of it is that the presumption of parental contact provides another opportunity for perpetrators of domestic abuse to prolong it. The Government are rightly reviewing this. Will Ministers ensure that we make the most of this opportunity to better protect women who suffer domestic abuse through the family court system?

Sarah Sackman: My hon. Friend is right to make that point. Our family courts should never become sites of retraumatisation for victims of domestic abuse. We are reviewing the presumption, and when we are ready, we will publish the findings and our policy response to that review.

Topical Questions

T1. [902436] **Charlotte Cane** (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): This Government inherited a record and rising Crown court backlog and prisons on the point of collapse, serving as breeding grounds for crime that create better criminals, not better citizens. The work of restoring safer streets in this country will be long and hard, but we are taking immediate action. Since the last Justice orals, we have increased the number of sitting days in the Crown court by 2,000 this financial year and boosted criminal legal aid by up to £92 million a year to get cases moving through the courts more quickly. We have published a 10-year prison capacity strategy, setting out plans to build 14,000 new prison places to ensure we always have the space to lock up dangerous criminals. We launched the Women's Justice Board, with one clear goal: to send fewer women to prison. We are doing what it takes to deliver swifter justice for victims and punishment that cuts crime.

Charlotte Cane: Ministers have talked quite a bit today about expanded powers for magistrates courts. Could the Secretary of State tell me what additional funding is being made available and what training there will be for magistrates to assist them with this expanded role?

Shabana Mahmood: The changes in relation to magistrates court sentencing powers were made by the previous Government due to prison capacity issues, and they were working well. We have restored those same powers, so I do not think those issues around training are necessarily engaged. However, we will ensure that legal advisers and the full package of measures that magistrates need to fulfil their obligations are in place.

T2. [902437] **Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): What support has the Ministry of Justice put in place for those serving indeterminate sentences for public protection, especially where they have additional needs?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): It is right that IPP sentences were abolished. Last week, I hosted a roundtable for MPs to discuss their concerns about IPP sentences and share the work the Department is doing. The Prisons Minister in the other place hosted a similar roundtable for peers. We are determined to make further progress towards a safe and sustainable release for those serving IPP sentences, while recognising that at all times public protection is paramount.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Two weeks ago, three grooming gang members were sentenced at Bradford Crown court for the most appalling rapes of children, but they received only six, seven and nine-year sentences respectively—six years, out on licence in four, for the rape of a child. Does the Secretary of State agree that those sentences are disgracefully short, and will she commit to using the sentencing review to mandate full life sentences for these evil people? If she will, she will have our support.

Shabana Mahmood: We have a shared objective in making sure that these evil individuals feel the full force of the law. I will not comment on individual sentencing decisions, and the shadow Lord Chancellor might wish to reflect on that decision; it is not appropriate to do so, given our collective commitment to the independence of the judiciary. However, as I said in response to earlier questions, we will legislate to make grooming an aggravating factor, and this Government will make sure that victims get the justice they deserve.

Robert Jenrick: I have written to the Attorney General asking him to review those sentences as potentially unduly lenient. Two of the men who were sentenced at Bradford Crown court for grooming gang offences were absent. They are thought to have absconded abroad. Can the Justice Secretary confirm how many grooming gang defendants the Government are currently pursuing overseas and what efforts are being made by the Government with, in this case, the Pakistani authorities, using every lever of the British state to locate these evil men and get justice for the victims?

Shabana Mahmood: I will happily write to the right hon. Gentleman with details on the specific case that he raises. He is right to say that we have international agreements and arrangements with other jurisdictions to ensure that offenders can be brought back to face justice in this country. I am sure that those arrangements are being applied appropriately, but I will make sure that he gets a fuller answer on the case that he has raised.

T7. [902444] **Lloyd Hatton** (South Dorset) (Lab): Today we learned not only that Yevgeny Prigozhin, a sanctioned warlord, used frozen funds to make legal threats to silence a British journalist, but that the enablers of this textbook example of lawfare have since gone unpunished,

with the Solicitors Regulation Authority ruling that Prigozhin's lawyers "broke no rules". That inaction, in the face of such clear-cut wrongdoing, shows that our current framework is inadequate. Can the Minister outline what steps the Government are taking to create a tough deterrent against harmful lawfare tactics, particularly when they are deployed by insidious individuals like Prigozhin?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Sarah Sackman): I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and for the campaigning work that he is doing in this area. Journalism is the lifeblood of democracy, and strategic lawsuits against public participation represent an abuse of the legal system; they are used by those with deep pockets to harass and silence journalism. Such behaviour is intolerable. My focus, and the focus of this Government, will be on the implementation of the Economic Crime and Corporate Transparency Act 2023, which introduced an early dismissal mechanism and cost protection for SLAPP defendants.

T3. [902440] **Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Last September, the Secretary of State confirmed that foreign national offenders blocking up our jails were being removed and deported. Will she update the House on how many have been removed and deported, and does she agree that the fastest way to free up capacity in our prisons is to remove the vast majority of them?

Shabana Mahmood: I agree that we need to do everything we can to remove foreign national offenders from our prisons. Between 5 July 2024 and 4 January 2025, 2,580 foreign national offenders were returned—a 23% increase on the same period in the previous year—and we are currently on track to remove more foreign national offenders this year than at any time in recent years.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): Humanist marriage has been legal in Scotland for 20 years but continues to wait to be legalised in England and Wales. The Law Commission made recommendations two years ago on clarifying the law, but when asked to set out a timetable for action, the Minister in the other place could only respond, "in the fullness of time."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 2 December 2024; Vol. 841, c. 910.] Can the Minister set out the timetable or, alternatively, say when the Government will make an order to end the long wait for humanist marriage?

Sarah Sackman: I understand that humanists have been campaigning for legally binding humanist weddings. The Government are committed to strengthening the rights and protections available, particularly for women in cohabiting couples. We will look at the Law Commission's work and publish our response in due course.

T5. [902442] **Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Gambling with Lives is a charity that supports families who have been bereaved by gambling-related suicide. Jo from Cullompton lost her son Daniel to gambling suicide, and speaks powerfully about it. What is the Minister doing to ensure that accurate data is recorded for each death linked to gambling?

Sarah Sackman: May I express how sorry I am to hear of the case of the hon. Gentleman's constituent? I am happy to write to him—he asks quite a specific question—but it is important that we provide support to all sorts of victims. That is why we have the victims code, which strengthens the power of the Victims' Commissioner, but I will write to the hon. Gentleman on that specific matter.

Jake Richards (Rother Valley) (Lab): Last week, the Court of Appeal overturned a first-instance decision regarding the anonymity of a judge who presided over the tragic Sara Sharif case in the family courts. I do not expect the Minister to comment on individual cases, and it is certainly not about that individual judge, but will the Government use this opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to open justice and press freedom?

Sarah Sackman: As my hon. Friend rightly says, I cannot comment on that specific case, but we adhere to the principle of open justice and transparency in our legal system. That is why we have the publication of sentencing remarks and transcripts, and the broadcasting of many of our hearings, so that the public can see exactly how justice in this country is administered.

T6. [902443] **Katie Lam** (Weald of Kent) (Con): We know that the Attorney General has recused himself from advising the Government, but he will not tell us what for, and he still refuses to be transparent about potential payments by former clients. Does the Secretary of State for Justice really not believe that the public have a right to know?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Lady should know there are robust processes in place in government to manage conflict of interest, which were in place under the previous Administration as well, but this is not something that any Government Minister will be giving a running commentary on.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Select Committee, Andy Slaughter.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): We have just witnessed the chair of the Criminal Cases Review Commission being prised out of her job, six months after the Secretary of State described her as "unable to fulfil her duties".

When will a new chair be appointed, and will this be accompanied by a wider review of the CCRC, to restore confidence in that damaged organisation?

Sarah Sackman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that we need to restore confidence in the CCRC. That is why we are taking the decision not only to appoint an interim chair to steady the ship but, more importantly, to implement the recommendations of the Henley review so that we can restore confidence in this important institution, particularly in the light of the appalling miscarriage of justice in the case of Andrew Malkinson.

T8. [902445] **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): With an ever-increasing prison population and monumental delays being experienced in the courts and throughout

the justice system, what steps is the Secretary of State taking to address the significant delays that arise from the period of time required to download and analyse digital material?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. We believe that much more can be achieved through the increased use of AI and other digital technology to speed up some of the paper processes that create delays across the criminal justice system. As chair of the Criminal Justice Board, I have asked for a cross-system criminal justice response on this and I will update the House in due course.

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): No doubt we all agree that preventable deaths should be prevented, and tragedies like Hillsborough and Grenfell must not be repeated because we fail to make changes, so what consideration has the Secretary of State given to creating a national oversight mechanism to ensure that lessons are learned from every state-related death?

Shabana Mahmood: The Government will shortly be publishing the Bill that campaigners refer to as the Hillsborough law, which will reflect issues relating to the duty of candour, which this Government are committed to, and I know that campaigners are making representations to the Home Office on the national oversight mechanism that it is currently considering.

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): Can the Secretary of State explain to the House in what circumstances the police and the Crown Prosecution Service are allowed to deny access to evidence, after a trial has concluded, to a defence lawyer who is seeking to appeal, as has happened in the Lucy Letby case and, I believe, in others?

Shabana Mahmood: The right hon. Gentleman will appreciate that, as Justice Secretary, I am not able to interfere in any independent decisions made by the police or the Crown Prosecution Service, but he has made his point and I will ensure that it is dealt with by the appropriate individuals—either the Home Secretary or the head of the CPS.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): There are serious questions about the transparency of the police, the CPS and the Government in the days and weeks following the Southport attack. In written answers to me, the

Government have refused to provide the dates when the Prime Minister was told that Rudakubana possessed ricin and an al-Qaeda training manual. Can the Justice Secretary tell me why?

Shabana Mahmood: The Prime Minister has responded to the other questions that have been raised. The appropriate information was made available at the appropriate time to either the Prime Minister or the Home Secretary. It was right that the Government did not give any commentary that could have collapsed the trial. On the specific charge relating to ricin, that decision required Law Officer approval, which was sought and immediately given.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): I know that the Justice Secretary is aware of the tragic case of my constituent Sara Sharif. Will she consider reforming family courts and ending the presumption in favour of parental contact despite the fact that there were safeguarding concerns?

Sarah Sackman: That case of that little girl, Sara Sharif, is one of the most tragic of recent times, and I know that that view is shared right across the House. That is why a safeguarding review is under way to look at all the agencies that were involved and should have been protecting that little girl from those who ended up killing her. We are looking at the presumption: there is a review, and we will consider the findings of that review and publish our response in due course.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): My constituent, who is a British citizen and the mother of two young children, faces the prospect of being forced to return to Poland to accompany those children under the Hague convention on the civil aspects of international child abduction, having fled escalating domestic abuse. If she does, her inability to speak the language or work will leave her entirely dependent on her abuser, even though he is barred from contacting her. Will the Minister work with me to ensure that domestic abuse is explicitly recognised as a valid defence against return orders of this type?

Sarah Sackman: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, and I invite her to write to me about that specific case, which sounds like it throws up a very difficult set of factual circumstances that I would like the opportunity to consider.

Extremism Review

12.35 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will make a statement on the Government's extremism review reported on today.

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): In our manifesto, the Government set out our commitment to redoubling efforts to counter extremism, including online, to stop people being radicalised and drawn towards hateful ideologies. A number of strands of activity have been established to progress this work, which, among other things, have led to the appointment of an interim Prevent commissioner, Lord Anderson, to drive improvements. We have published plans to introduce youth diversion orders to tackle young people at risk of terrorism.

Many documents produced across Government as part of commissioned work are not implemented and do not constitute Government policy. This work did not recommend an expansion in the definition of extremism, and there are not and have never been any plans to do so. To be clear, the leaked documents were not current or new Government policy.

As we have said repeatedly, Islamist extremism followed by far-right extremism are the biggest threats we face. Last week, the Home Secretary set out our plans to carry out an end-to-end review of Prevent thresholds on Islamist extremism, because we are concerned that the number of referrals is too low. Ideology, particularly Islamist extremism followed by far-right extremism, continues to be at the heart of our approach to countering extremism and terrorism.

But, as the horrific Southport attack shows, we also need more action on those drawn towards mixed ideologies and violence-obsessed young people. As the Home Secretary set out in the House last week, there has been a troubling rise in the number of cases involving teenagers drawn into extremism, including Islamist extremism, far-right extremism, mixed and confused ideologies, and obsession with violence. This includes a threefold increase in under-18s investigated for involvement in terrorism. Some 162 people were referred to Prevent last year for concerns relating to school massacres. Our Five Eyes counter-terror partners have also warned about the growing radicalisation of teenagers and young people.

We will continue to drive work to counter the most significant extremist threats in the weeks and months ahead, as the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister have already set out.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Home Secretary.

Chris Philp: Yesterday evening, Policy Exchange put into the public domain the Home Secretary's review into extremism, or at least a version of it. It contained some deeply concerning proposals that I would like the Minister to directly address.

The report apparently says that the definition of extremism, for the purposes of Prevent and other programmes, could be extended to include the spreading of misinformation, the so-called online "manosphere" and misogyny. First, does the Minister agree with Prevent reviewer William Shawcross that we need to focus the attention of Prevent and counter-terrorism policing on

those with extremist ideologies and not risk diluting attention with these much wider issues? Ninety-four per cent of terrorism-caused deaths since 1999 were caused by Islamist terrorism. Does the Minister agree that combating Islamist terrorism is more important than policing the manosphere? The wider issues referenced, such as violence against women and girls and more general violence obsession, are, of course, serious. However, they are best dealt with by the police, the criminal justice system, social services or mental health services, which have the power to section people that pose a risk.

Secondly, will the Minister commit to retaining the changes to non-crime hate incidents made by the last Government? Police should not be looking into matters or recording personal data where there is no imminent risk of criminality. To do so would waste police time and infringe freedom of speech. Any move away from that will enable the thought police to stop anyone telling uncomfortable truths that left-wing lawyers do not like.

Finally, the report the Home Secretary commissioned repeats the Prime Minister's previous smear that campaigning against rape gangs, which we now know consist of Pakistani-heritage perpetrators, is far-right. The report also says that commenting on elements of policing policy is extremist and far-right. That is nonsense. Campaigning against rape gangs is not extremist or far right, and commenting on policing, whether we agree or not with the comments, is simply the exercise of free speech. Will the Minister categorically disown those remarks, which were contained in the Home Secretary's report?

Dan Jarvis: Let me gently remind the shadow Home Secretary that his remarks refer to a leaked report, which, I could not have been clearer, does not and will not represent Government policy. The work, as I understand it—because it is not entirely clear which version of the report was leaked—did not recommend an expansion in the definition of extremism, and as I said to the House earlier, there are not nor will there be any plans to do so.

The shadow Home Secretary mentioned William Shawcross. Again, I will gently remind him that this Government have implemented all but one of the recommendations in the Shawcross review. He also asked about non-hate crime incidents. Again, the Home Secretary has been very clear about that: a consistent and common-sense approach must be taken with regard to non-hate crime incidents. The Government have, again, also been crystal clear that our top priority for policing is to deliver on the safer streets mission, rebuild neighbourhood policing, restore public confidence and make progress on the ambition to halve knife crime and violence against women and girls.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I must be careful here, Mr Speaker, because I think you were right to allow this urgent question. However, can my hon. Friend the Minister explain just exactly why we are here? It seems to be—

Mr Speaker: I think I can answer that: it is because I have decided. We do not need to pursue it any further.

Clive Efford: The shadow Home Secretary seems to have come here to ask questions about a document that is not Government policy and to stand there making

indignant statements about issues that are not Government policy either. Does my hon. Friend not think that we should be taking a much more level-headed approach to this issue than that which has been displayed by the Conservative party?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his observations, which I entirely agree with. This Government and Ministers are always happy to come to this place to discuss and debate Government policy. The leaked report is not Government policy.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): There is no place for extremism or hatred of any form in our society. It is right that the Government work with communities to stamp that out, not least after the previous Conservative Government seemed to seek out opportunities to sow more and more seeds of division.

From what we have heard about the extremism review report, it does not bring the right answers forward and risks being counterproductive.

Now it is up to the Government to develop a counter-extremism strategy that is strong, effective and alive to the modern challenges facing our society. That includes addressing an increasingly complex online world and its role in inciting extremism. I would welcome more details from the Minister on how the Government will do this. To be effective, the work must also properly engage communities. Will the Minister set out how communities will be consulted on any upcoming counter-extremism strategies?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Member for her entirely sensible and reasonable questions. She is absolutely right to say that there is no place for extremism in our society. This Government will work across party, across Government, and use all available levers to ensure that we have the right resources in the right place to tackle what is an increasingly challenging threat. She is right that an important element of that is the work that we need to do and are doing with regard to the online space. She will be aware that the Online Safety Act 2023 will come into force soon, and we have consistently said that we will look very closely at how effective that will be, and that where we need to make changes we will of course do so. As she can imagine, the conversations continue with the social media companies. We expect them to do the right thing, and where there is illegal content online, to remove it at pace.

The hon. Member is also right to stress the importance of working with communities. That is why counter-extremism work is done properly across Government, with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government as a key partner.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his unambiguous statement. I had a feeling that he was going to say something along those lines, because I read a similar unambiguous statement from the Home Office in this morning's newspapers. Therefore, I do not understand how the shadow Home Secretary has struggled to follow the Government's position. Does the Minister agree that the correct way to deal with extremism is to focus on what drives it? As we heard in the House last week in relation to the

Southport attack, weaponry, including knives, has a devastating effect across the country. What steps is the Home Office taking to restrict access to knives and weaponry for those with extreme views?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend raises an important matter. Over the weekend, the Home Secretary announced stricter age verification checks and a ban on doorstep drops to protect people from knife crime. These measures are set to be included in the Crime and Policing Bill, which is expected to be introduced to Parliament by the spring. Under these new rules, a two-step system will be mandated for all retailers selling knives online, requiring customers to submit photo ID at the point of sale and again on delivery. Delivery companies will only be able to deliver a bladed article to the person who purchased it, and it will also be illegal to leave a package containing a bladed weapon on a doorstep when no one is in to receive it.

Mr James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): In the early years of Margaret Thatcher's Government, Lord Scarman was commissioned to write a report on what were—they did not use this phrase at the time—concerns among the black community about two-tier policing. In response to those concerns, the police listened, changed their procedures, and engaged in consultative work with those communities, so why is it that when communities complain about two-tier policing under this Government, they are branded far-right extremists?

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. Gentleman will have worked throughout his time with our police forces—not just as former Home Secretary, in that great office of state, but elsewhere—and I very much hope that he shares the admiration and respect—

Mr Cleverly: Answer the question.

Dan Jarvis: I am answering the question. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman shares the admiration and respect that we on these Benches have for the incredibly difficult and challenging work that the police do. I have to say that those who seek to progress a narrative of two-tier policing do no favours to our police forces. All they seek to do is make it more difficult for those extraordinary men and women who step forward to serve in our police force to do a very important job.

Jo White (Bassetlaw) (Lab): In all the commentary overnight on this leaked advice, I was struck by one comment from the shadow Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), that was reported on GB News. He said:

"Of course violence against women and girls and some of the other issues raised in this report... warrant attention by the police"

—"warrant attention"? Is it any wonder that sexual violence was allowed to become endemic under the previous Government and that the best a previous Home Office Minister could say is that it warrants attention?

Dan Jarvis: The shadow Justice Secretary was a Home Office Minister for a considerable period of time. It might be worthwhile if he reflects on the record of his Government while he was a Minister.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): So this report that has just been leaked was commissioned by the Home Secretary after the Southport horrors last July. The truth is that it has come out and all the recommendations have basically been immediately written off by the Home Secretary. Does that not confirm that the people in her Department are completely out of touch with her wishes and those of the British people?

Dan Jarvis: Not at all. The hon. Member is simply not correct. This work was being progressed before the dreadful incident in Southport. I am sure, and I certainly hope, that he will appreciate that Secretaries of State will routinely commission advice from civil servants. Some of the recommendations of that advice will be accepted and agreed; some will not, but it is routine practice in government to ask civil servants to look very closely at particular issues. Ultimately, it is for Ministers to decide, and Ministers will decide.

Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Lab/Co-op): As interesting as it sounds, I have no idea what a “manosphere” is. As far as I am concerned, the only real question that the Security Minister needs to answer is what action the Government are taking to ensure this kind of disgraceful, politically motivated leak to a former Tory adviser cannot happen again, especially on issues of national security. We proudly have an impartial civil service, so will he ask the Cabinet Secretary to order an immediate leak inquiry and put on gardening leave those Tory advisers and civil servants who are still working in Downing Street and those who are regarded as close associates of Andrew Gilligan?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his helpful point. It is standard procedure in circumstances such as these that the Cabinet Secretary orders a leak inquiry, and that would be the right way to proceed under these circumstances.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): In Keighley, we have seen how labelling legitimate concerns around grooming gangs as far-right has distorted conversations, silenced victims and inadvertently given space to bad faith actors. It is therefore incredibly concerning to see this report written by Home Office officials using similar language, calling grooming gangs an “alleged” problem and once again framing this issue through the lens of the far right rather than the eyes of victims. Does the Minister agree with the language used in the report around grooming gangs? If not, how can he, or the Home Secretary, have faith in the Home Office officials?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Member has been consistent in raising his concerns in this particular area. I hope he will understand that I was clear earlier that many documents are produced across Government as part of commission work that are not implemented and that do not constitute Government policy. To be absolutely clear with him, this is a leaked document, but the work did not recommend an expansion in the extremism definition. These are not Government plans; this is not Government policy.

Mike Tapp (Dover and Deal) (Lab): If the Conservatives now consider it okay for public servants to leak documents relating to national security, I hope they will not object if we see leaks on matters relating to their time in

charge, such as the risks arising from Russian donors to the Tory party and to our great country—whatever happened to British values? Does the Security Minister agree—

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Shelbrooke, your voice has continued even though I don't see as much of you these days.

Mike Tapp: Thank you, Mr Speaker—I am not surprised Conservative Members are wound up by that. Does the Security Minister agree that at least one party in this House needs to behave within our values when it comes to security, and that security leaks are wrong?

Dan Jarvis: All leaks are wrong, but let me take this opportunity to say that I am actually very proud of the civil servants in the Home Office, who work extremely hard day in, day out to keep our country safe from a diverse range of threats. A number of Conservative Members here have worked in the Home Office, and I very much hope that they share my view that we should be extremely grateful to those civil servants who work around the clock to keep our country safe, and I am grateful for their efforts.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): The horrendous events in Southport show that people who do not fit the profile of Islamist or far-right extremism can still present serious risk. Does the Minister agree that there is a real danger in the promotion of misogyny and opposition to feminism online and that to combat the scourge of violence against women and girls, which sees one woman murdered almost every three days in the UK, the Government must take misogyny seriously as a form of extremism?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. She makes an incredibly important point, and hopefully she will know and understand how seriously this Government take those issues. We made an ambitious manifesto commitment to halve violence against women and girls over 10 years. That is something that, as Ministers in the Home Office with the Home Secretary and the Safeguarding Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), we are working at pace to address. We take these matters very seriously, and she is absolutely right to identify the particular challenges that exist online. The Safeguarding Minister will have more to say about this in due course.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I am grateful to the Security Minister for his words today. He has successfully exposed the reports about the leak as the nonsense they are. But there are serious issues here, including around how we respond to the rising level of youth violence and extremism and the increasing availability of online material that fuels that obsession with violence and death. Will he tell us how the intelligence services are approaching this challenge and what more the Government can do to stop young people disappearing into this dangerous abyss?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend raises an important point, and the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary have both recently referred to this, including during their statements on 21 February. She is right that there has been a troubling rise in the number of cases involving

youth men, boys and teenagers who are being drawn into extremism. As I said to the House earlier, that includes a range of different areas, including Islamist and far-right extremism, but also there is a particularly concerning rise in those drawn into what is referred to as mixed and confused ideology, and those young men and boys who have an obsession with violence. This threat is not unique to the United Kingdom; it is being experienced internationally, but I assure her that the intelligence services and our law enforcement partners are working with Government at pace, along with our international partners, to look at what more we can do in this particular area.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I first echo the Minister's point that we should be grateful to those civil servants who are working night and day to protect us from terrorist threats? I suppose we should also be grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for denouncing the document, which certainly emanated from his Department, without making any personal criticism of those civil servants. But does that document not demonstrate that a large body of opinion has completely lost its way on how we deal with extremism and terrorist threats? I urge him to encourage the Department to return to what Prevent is intended to achieve and not get distracted by all this political correctness, given that most of the country have no idea what a "non-hate crime incident" is. We need to return to proper language that people understand, or the Government themselves will be driving people's disillusion and despair about these matters.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, as always, for his observations, and for his point about civil servants. He talks about political correctness; having served together in the House over many years, I hope he knows the Home Secretary and me well. Fundamentally, this must be about the threat. We will leave no stone unturned to ensure that we have the appropriate level of resource in the right place at the right time, so that the ever-evolving and complex nature of the threat we face—both in the United Kingdom and abroad—is appropriately addressed by our law enforcement agencies. I give the hon. Gentleman a categorical assurance that we will continue to work around the clock to ensure that we protect the public.

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): I thank the Security Minister for clarifying the timeline of when this report was commissioned. We should remember that since it was commissioned, we have seen the brutal, sadistic murders in Southport and the riots that came after them. Clearly, we are living in a time of rising and worrying extremism, which should concern Members on all sides of this House. Does the Security Minister therefore agree that Members on all sides of this House should be working together to deal with extremism, rather than playing political games?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I hope the House knows that it is always my default setting—if you want to put it that way—to try to work collaboratively with Members across this House. I give my hon. Friend and the House an absolute assurance of the seriousness with which we take these matters. I think Members will understand that it is right

to commission civil servants to look very carefully at the profound nature of the threat that we face, and to bring forward policy suggestions and solutions for how we as a Government are best placed to address them. That is what is happening, but this Government will always do the right thing to ensure that we protect the public.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): We have to tread very carefully when we enter into this territory. The leaking of this report has already raised alarm bells with a number of different groups, and has given the right another opportunity to spread division and further disinformation. What reassurances can the Minister give campaign groups, environmentalists and those who have taken up campaigns that they will not be included when he finally brings forward his plans in the future?

Dan Jarvis: I am happy to give the hon. Gentleman an assurance that this Government will always approach these matters in a level-headed and consensual way. It is the case that previous Governments sought to use these issues as a political football.

Chris Philp *indicated dissent.*

Dan Jarvis: It is the case that previous Governments were, on occasion, motivated as much by a desire to score political points. That will never be the approach of this Government. We are motivated only by a desire to protect the public.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I echo the concerns raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray). Just this weekend in my own constituency, we had an incident in our community with young people and knives. Although I cannot comment on that particular incident, I am extremely concerned about the availability of knives, particularly to our young people. Does the Minister agree that the sale of knives is too easy, particularly online, and can he tell me and my constituents what the Government are doing to restrict that availability and the fear it spreads in our communities?

Dan Jarvis: The Government share my hon. Friend's concern about the availability of knives online. That is why—as I said to another hon. Member a moment ago—just this weekend, the Home Secretary announced stricter age verification checks and a ban on doorstep drops, in order to better protect people from knife crime. We will do everything that we possibly can, working with online retailers and the police, to ensure that the availability of knives is very significantly reduced in order to protect the public.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The repudiation of the contents of this report is a step back from thought crime, but the danger remains of two steps towards it. Is it not outrageous when individuals are harassed by the police when they have not broken the law?

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. Gentleman is right in the sense that, of course, the police should and will be guided by the law. As an experienced Member, I am sure he will have worked very closely with the police over many years. My experience of working closely with the

[*Dan Jarvis*]

police is that they make the right judgments for the right reasons, but where there are issues that require further attention, the Government will of course look at those matters.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): It seems that advice to Ministers on national security issues has been leaked to a former Tory special adviser, and as a result of that leak the Security Minister has been summoned to the Chamber to answer questions, even though the leak does not represent Government policy and the Minister has made it clear that the advice has been rejected. Does he agree that this sets a dangerous precedent and may encourage more disgruntled individuals to commit politically motivated leaks, and that it shows that His Majesty's official Opposition are sadly sinking into the mire of populism, which can only undermine our national security and, indeed, our democracy in the future?

Dan Jarvis: As I hope I have made crystal clear, I am always happy to come to this House to debate and discuss matters relating to national security. I will do that whenever the House wishes me to do so, but on this particular occasion—as I think I have also been crystal clear about—this leak is about something that does not represent Government policy.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): There is no place for extremism in our society or country, from anyone. Prevent unfairly associates certain ethnic minorities and religious groups with extremism, and the programme's vague definition of extremism has led to inconsistent implementation, with concerns about overreach. What steps are the Government taking to address the discrimination and failings in the Prevent programme and make it impartial and effective, to prevent extremism and violence across all of society?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Member is right to say that there is no place for extremism in this country—of course that is the case—but I do not agree with his characterisation of the Prevent programme. That programme consists of some extremely dedicated and hard-working public servants, but the hon. Member will know that the Home Secretary has announced the appointment of an interim Prevent commissioner, Lord Anderson. He will be looking very closely at how the Prevent programme works and how it can be made to work more effectively in the future.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): When tackling extremism—whether violent or non-violent—is the Security Minister satisfied that the current division of labour between counter-terrorism policing and the security service is understood well enough by those two organisations, and is delivering and working well?

Dan Jarvis: I am always very grateful to the right hon. Member—he speaks with real experience and authority on these matters, and he raises an important and reasonable question. Yes, I am happy to give him that assurance; I work incredibly closely with both counter-terrorism police and operational partners on a daily basis. Of course, we look at these things very closely and keep

them under review, and if we think that we need to change the balance in any particular area, we will not hesitate to do so.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): If the Security Minister thinks that there is not two-tier policing in this country, then quite frankly, he needs to get out more. This report states that anybody who calls out two-tier policing is a far-right extremist and that grooming and rape gangs are an “alleged” problem. Does the Minister agree?

Dan Jarvis: The point I was seeking to make earlier, which I am happy to reiterate to the hon. Member, is about the importance that we on the Labour Benches attach to supporting the police. We think that the police do an incredibly difficult job, and while the hon. Member might think that I need to get out a bit more, perhaps he might consider spending a bit of time with police officers on the beat in his constituency and in his area. If he were to do so, I am quite confident that he would see that they are exceptional people doing difficult work under difficult circumstances. There is a real risk that seeking to progress this narrative undermines the important work of the police.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): It is good to see the Minister at the Dispatch Box to distance himself from the conclusions of a report commissioned by his Department, but reports do not leak themselves. Why does he think that whoever leaked this does not agree with him that there is “Nothing to see here”?

Dan Jarvis: Ultimately, that is a matter for the leaker, but as I have said, it is standard procedure in circumstances such as this for the Cabinet Office to initiate a leak inquiry. I think that would be the right course of action under these circumstances, so if I were the leaker, I would not be too comfortable at the moment.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): In drawing up a policy, the Minister needs to consult with representatives of all communities, particularly those suffering the worst attacks by the far right in Britain, so can he assure us that he will be meeting the Muslim Council of Britain and other Muslim organisations, and that the policy of non-co-operation with the MCB has been brought to an end, despite statements by his office that there was no plan to do so?

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. Gentleman is right that the Government have a responsibility to consult with all communities. Of course, that work is shared across Government, which is why we work very closely with other Departments, not least the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which is progressing its own bits of work on all this. On his specific point about liaison, there is not a change to the Government policy with regard to that.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): Can the Minister explain why the review appears to focus on the symptoms of extremism rather than its underlying root causes? Can he assure the House that that mindset is not directing policy in the Home Office?

Dan Jarvis: I can assure the hon. Member that the mindset that directs policy in the Home Office is what the Home Secretary and I think is in our national interest. The Home Secretary and I will use every tool and every lever at our disposal to ensure we keep the public safe. That is what we get out of bed every morning to do, and that is what we will continue to do.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): I trust the Minister will agree that terrorism in all its forms is always deserving only of punishment and repudiation, never of glorification, particularly by political leaders. Does he therefore agree that it is beyond reprehensible that the First Minister of Northern Ireland, Michelle O'Neill, continues to attend IRA celebrations of the actions of IRA terrorists? Just before Christmas, she laid a wreath and spoke at the commemoration for three IRA terrorists who blew themselves up with their own bomb. What message does that send on extremism to future generations?

Dan Jarvis: I hope the hon. and learned Member will understand that I do not think that it would be appropriate for me to delve into matters in Northern Ireland in the context of this response. But his remarks at the beginning of his question about there never being an excuse or justification for terrorism are a point of consensus around which we can all unite.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): The Security Minister recently told me that it remains Government policy not to engage with the Muslim Council of Britain. Last week, the Minister for Social Security and Disability attended the MCB annual leadership dinner. Did that Minister breach Government policy, or is engagement with the MCB now tolerated after all?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Member asked me a question previously at Home Office orals, specifically in the context of engagement by the Home Secretary and her Ministers.

Chris Philp: Answer the question!

Dan Jarvis: The shadow Home Secretary is chuntering from a sedentary position, but I was literally shown the *Hansard* transcript before this urgent question. [Interruption.] If he will allow me, I will respond to the question.

The hon. Member asked me previously about engagement with the Home Secretary and Home Office Ministers. I clearly cannot account from the Dispatch

Box for other Ministers' activities. However, I am happy to look at the circumstances he has raised. I am happy to confirm to him that Government policy has not changed, and if there are specific points I need to come back to him on, I am very happy to do so.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Extreme misogyny associated with far-right ideology is a major factor in extremism. It should be dealt with, to counteract the one woman killed every three days in this country, and to ensure that the horrendous Southport killings, the five killings by Jake Davison in Plymouth and the 51 massacred in Christchurch, New Zealand do not happen again. No one wants violence—ideological or political. Does the Minister agree that our obsession with focusing solely on Islamism has left repeated Governments blindsided to real threats facing us from elsewhere?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Member is right to say that extreme misogyny is, frankly, a disgusting blight on our country. That is why this Government made a manifesto commitment to halve the levels of violence against women and girls. It is an ambitious commitment that has not been made previously. As I told the House earlier, the Home Secretary and the Safeguarding Minister are working at pace to seek to address these issues. It is a big priority for the Government, and we intend to make good on the commitments we have made.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers and, in particular, welcome his commitment to supporting the police, which he has mentioned a few times. I have great concerns that the revival of non-crime hate incidents will mean more work for our overstretched police forces, and that it will mean getting involved in a war on offensive words, rather than the war on drugs, the war on terrorism or the war on violence against women and children. Will the revival of non-crime hate incidents come with a substantial increase in police funding, and if so, where will that come from?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Member, as ever, and I am very grateful for the support that he has provided to the police over many years. Let me seek to reassure him, because the Home Secretary has been clear that a consistent and common-sense approach must be taken to non-crime hate incidents. The Government have been crystal clear that our top priority for policing is delivering on our safer streets mission.

Airport Expansion

1.17 pm

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if she will make a statement on Government policy on airport expansion.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane): I know that the hon. Member feels passionately about the issue of airport expansion, but I would like to make it clear that the press stories that have generated this urgent question are speculative and I cannot comment on their contents—[*Interruption.*] But we do have a world-class aviation sector in the UK. The Government are committed to securing the long-term future of the aviation sector, and we recognise the benefits of the connectivity it creates between the UK and the rest of the world. It is a sector that I am incredibly proud of. In 2022 the air transport and aerospace sectors directly provided around 240,000 jobs in the UK, of which just under 1,000 were in aerospace. In 2023 the air transport and aerospace sectors directly contributed around £25 billion to gross domestic product, of which around £14 billion was from the air transport sector and around £11 billion was from aerospace.

We have been clear that any airport expansion proposals would need to demonstrate that they contribute to economic growth, are compatible with the UK's legally binding climate change commitments, and meet strict environmental standards on airport quality and noise pollution. There is currently no live development consent order application for a third runway at Heathrow airport, and it is for a scheme promoter to decide how it takes forward any development consent order application for that runway. The Government would carefully consider any development consent order application for the third runway at Heathrow, in line with relevant planning processes. The Secretary of State is currently considering advice on Luton airport and Gatwick airport expansions. As these are live applications, I cannot comment on them further today.

I understand the concerns of many Members of the House about how airport expansion may be compatible with our climate change targets. I would like to assure them that the Government have committed to delivering greener transport through sustainable aviation fuel and airspace modernisation. This will help meet the UK's net zero targets, and it supports the Government's mission to make Britain a clean energy superpower. Airport expansion will need to be considered carefully alongside these commitments.

Siân Berry: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question, and I thank the Minister for his response. It is vital that Parliament is not sidelined when the Government form new policies, especially policies that could wreck our climate ambitions.

Does the Minister understand that expanding London's airports and building a third runway at Heathrow would be vastly irresponsible in the midst of approaching climate breakdown, and would literally be flying in the face of the Climate Change Committee's advice? How can Ministers even be considering that, when 2024 was the year that we went over 1.5° warming—the limit that

we committed to not breaking in the Paris climate agreement? How can Ministers see catastrophic wildfires in California, deadly floods in Spain last year, and devastating floods this year in the UK, and still pursue a wrong policy?

Yesterday, the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero told the Environmental Audit Committee that

“any aviation expansion must be justified within carbon budgets”.

Can the Minister explain why we are hearing trailed announcements of multiple airport expansions, exactly in the month before new advice from the Climate Change Committee is delivered? The committee could not have been clearer in previous reports that without a framework to manage aviation demand, we should not expand airports. Has he seen research from the New Economics Foundation estimating that approving airport expansion plans for Heathrow, Gatwick and Luton airports alone will serve to cancel out the carbon savings of the Government's clean power action plan?

The Government's arguments that I have seen appear to rest on the idea that there are new technologies ready to go that will cut carbon emissions and allow large airport expansions. In reality, does the Minister accept that such innovations, many of which are still not ready for commercial use, cannot be relied upon? Will he act in line with the science and our climate commitments, do the responsible thing and rule out a reckless airport expansion policy?

Mike Kane: There is always a trade-off to be had, if applications come forward, between noise, carbon and growing our economy. We recognise that Heathrow has operated at over 95% capacity for most of the past two decades, which has presented limited opportunities for growth in route networks and passenger numbers. We live in an interconnected world, where people want to visit their family members and do business across our planet. This Government have moved faster in the first six months than the previous Government did in 14 years, by introducing the sustainable aviation fuel mandate, so that 2% of all fuel sourced from 1 January this year must come from a renewable source. Where was the hon. Member when we introduced that in this House? It is one of the most forward-thinking, sustainable measures that we have brought to this place. In the next few months, as part of His Majesty's legislative agenda, we will be introducing the revenue certainty mechanism to create a world-class SAF industry here in the UK. I hope to see the hon. Member supporting the Government from the opposition Benches as we clean up our transport sector, our aviation sector and our economy as a whole.

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

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): A third runway at Heathrow has significant implications for UK-wide growth, for our carbon commitments, and for the 600,000 people who will live in the new 54 dB corridor of significant noise pollution, as well as air pollution. Does the Minister agree that such an announcement should be made in the context of a national aviation strategy? If he does, when will we see it?

Mike Kane: I thank the Chair of the Transport Committee for her question. The airports national planning framework under the last Government has not been updated for some time, and we will shortly bring forward proposals to do that as part of our package. While there is currently no development consent application for Heathrow, we have been clear that expansion proposals would need to demonstrate that they contribute to economic growth, are compatible with our climate change targets, and meet strict environmental standards for air quality and noise pollution—the four tests.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): In recent days we have heard that the Chancellor is about to announce her support for airport expansion at Luton, Gatwick and Heathrow. His Majesty's Opposition are supportive of airport expansion because we recognise the huge economic benefits that would bring. For Luton and Gatwick, as the Minister has said, planning processes are well under way, but the situation at Heathrow is rather different.

A completed third runway at Heathrow would undoubtedly bring economic benefits, which we would support, but delivering that will not be straightforward because there are major logistical barriers to its construction. Those include, but are not limited to: hundreds of thousands of additional people being brought on to Heathrow's flightpath; the potential for significant disruption to the M25 and M4, which could harm the economy for years to come; the fact that a large incinerator is in the way and would have to be demolished; and the need to address local concerns about noise and air pollution. The uncertainties do not end there, because to date Heathrow has not applied for a development consent order, and neither has it confirmed that it intends to do so.

That all leaves the Minister with many questions to answer. What assessment has he made of the impact of building a third runway on the M25 and M4, which are two of the busiest motorways in Europe? How certain is he that any proposed plan will have the support of affected communities? What is the estimated cost, and who will pay not just for the runway construction, but for the massive additional work that will need to be done, including, among other things, rerouting motorways, demolishing the incinerator and rebuilding it elsewhere? Perhaps most importantly, what assurances can he provide that there will be an application for a development consent order?

I sincerely hope that the Minister can answer those questions, because if he cannot it will be clear that this is not a serious policy, but rather a panicked and rushed attempt by the Chancellor of the Exchequer to distract attention from the state of the economy, which is currently withering under this floundering Labour Government.

Mike Kane: Well, the brass neck! The last Government crashed the economy, sending mortgages through the roof, and called an early election to avoid having to make difficult decisions. Transport policy should be enabling growth as a priority in this country, so that we can bring about the change that the British people voted for. For 14 years we had a Government who had become so sclerotic in aviation, and indeed maritime—that

is also part of my brief—that no decisions were brought forward on decarbonising the maritime or aviation sectors, or making the difficult decisions that this country needs to make. As the hon. Member rightly says, there is currently no development consent order before us, and that is for Heathrow or a related party to bring forward.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): For me and for you, Mr Speaker, there is more than an element of déjà-vu in this debate. The Minister has said that what we have heard is speculative, but the Chancellor's statements seem to be more authoritative than that. Has the Department provided the Chancellor with an assessment of where the 8,000 to 10,000 people in my constituency who will have their homes demolished or rendered unliveable will live if Heathrow expansion goes ahead? Has the Minister mapped for the Chancellor the flightpaths of the additional quarter of a million planes flying over the homes of people in those marginal seats of Uxbridge, Watford, Harrow and elsewhere? Has he advised the Chancellor on some of the figures that are being bandied about regarding the economic benefits, which seem to derive from Airports Commission figures that are out of date and that his own Department rubbished very thoroughly in recent years?

Mike Kane: My right hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner for his constituents, but there is no DCO at the moment and we do not know the impact—that will be a matter for Heathrow or a third party to bring forward. I would like to hear a more full-throated support for our airspace modernisation plan, which will improve resilience, capacity and flexibility when it comes to aircraft noise over affected communities. When it comes to growth, my constituency, as you well know, Mr Speaker, has seen £2 billion of the Manchester MIX scheme at Manchester airport, with the development of the Hut Group and the most advanced Amazon fulfilment centre on the planet. We know that aviation brings growth and jobs. We know that there is a trade-off to be had, and we will have those conversations if a development consent order is brought before us.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): The Minister gave an admirably Delphic yet still disappointing answer. While we must grow the economy, we must not do so at the expense of the environment. Expanding Heathrow, Gatwick and Luton airports will drive, or even fly, a coach and horses through our climate commitments, adding 92 million tonnes of carbon dioxide to our carbon footprint by 2050. Do not just take my word for it: the Mayor of London; his previous deputy Mayor for transport, now the Transport Secretary; the Environment Secretary; the Chief Secretary to the Treasury; and the Prime Minister have all previously been opposed, as is the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero. Can I ask the Minister three questions? First, why has his boss, the former London deputy Mayor for transport, changed her mind? Secondly, how can the Government reconcile this massive growth in carbon emissions with our climate commitments? Thirdly, why, if the Government are looking to grow our economy, are they not re-engaging meaningfully with Europe by negotiating a customs union?

Mike Kane: That last one floored me ever so slightly. “Delphic”, the hon. Member says—or ambiguous and obscure, which is slightly like Liberal Democrat policies on aviation. They are one foot in, one foot out, shake it all about. They say one thing to one community under a flightpath, and another thing about jobs to another community under a flightpath. Whatever I say will end up on the Focus leaflets, but they cannot have it both ways. They cannot support growth, jobs, airspace modernisation and sustainable aviation fuels and then say to their constituents, “Look what this terrible Government are doing.” We have a firm plan for aviation in this country, and we are going to carry it out.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that plans for the third runway have gone cold over the past decade, since the airport commission? As he says, there is not even an application for a development consent order. Does he agree that there is no chance of spades in the ground this Parliament? If there were, that is when the problems would really start.

Mike Kane: For too long and on too many issues, this nation just has not made the tough decisions. When it comes to airport expansion, our world-class aviation sector, admired across the world, and decarbonising our sector, we are making huge progress—more in the past six months than in 14 years under the Tories. We will continue on our mission of renewing the national airport strategy, and will look at development consent orders as they become live. That is a quasi-judicial matter, and I cannot comment on Luton and Gatwick, as Members know. We will wait to see whether Heathrow or a related party brings forward a development consent order.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): Manston airport in Kent in my constituency has been fallow and the subject of legal action for far too long, but that is happily now behind us. We hope and expect that within the next few weeks, there will be announcements on funding that will lead to the development of a state-of-the-art net zero airport in Kent. Manston does not appear to feature in the Government’s plans. Can the Minister assure me that his eye is on that ball, and that Manston will become part of the growth programme?

Mike Kane: I have spoken to the right hon. Member about Manston in opposition and in government. We wait to see what will be brought forward there, but it could be an exciting opportunity, particularly for cargo; we could have zero emission vessels shipping content into the port of London. We will wait and see whether the airport comes with a development consent order, and we will judge that on its merits.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I am old enough to have been there the last time this question was voted on. In the spirit of Gordon Brown and his tests over the euro, we applied tests of our own on capacity, carbon commitments, minimising noise and environmental impacts, and ensuring benefits for the whole UK. Can the Minister tell me whether those sensible tests still apply? Can he add another one, about costs to the public purse and deliverability, for my constituents, who will be the most affected? They want a better, not a bigger, Heathrow.

Mike Kane: I re-emphasise that there is no development consent order for Heathrow at the moment. We know that for all airports, surface access is essential. The public transport penetration rate within an hour is key to the markets that airports can access from across the planet to support their growth. We have a world-class transport system in the south-east, but in any development consent order, Heathrow or its related parties will have to prove how we can get new people to that site.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): If, as we expect, the Chancellor announces her support tomorrow for a third runway at Heathrow, that will be a massive U-turn from the Prime Minister’s previous position, and it is patently clear that a third runway will fail all of Labour’s four tests—on growth across our regions, on climate, on air pollution, and on noise pollution. The economic and environmental cases are in tatters, and no airlines want to foot the bill for a third runway. Will the Minister concede that any such announcement would simply be virtue signalling by a Chancellor in search of growth where she will not achieve it, and would damage our environment and our communities at the same time?

Mike Kane: I support the Chancellor’s pursuit of growth. For too long, we have been stagnant, and we know that this area can provide growth. I have seen that in my constituency, as I have pointed out. Where was the hon. Member when we talked about sustainable aviation fuels? Where was she when we committed £63 million to the advanced fuels fund to help the SAF industry grow in this country? We have announced £1 billion for the Aerospace Technology Institute to look at zero emission flights. Would it not be great if, one day, a Minister could stand here and say that all internal flights will be zero-emission? I want to leave my successor, whoever they are, the opportunity to say that within the next decade.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): Many of my constituents in Ealing Southall work at Heathrow or in its supply chain, and they will welcome the good-quality, well-paid jobs that airport expansion will bring. However, I have other constituents who worry about the environmental impact of any expansion. In taking any decision on this matter, will the Minister ensure that he balances the need for growth and for good-quality local jobs against the need to minimise air pollution and noise pollution?

Mike Kane: What a terrific question. [*Interruption.*] Well, it is. It hits the mark, in that there is a trade-off between noise, carbon and growing our economy for our people. Airports create high-paid, trade-unionised jobs, not just because of the aircraft that come in and out, but because of the ground handling services. We know that aviation communities are much better off because of the jobs that are created, and we have to balance the trade-off in the years ahead as we make tough decisions to grow our economy.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): I remind the Minister that sustainable aviation fuel is not an answer to poor air quality, which is the main reason why attempted expansion at Heathrow has failed in the past. It is also the reason for the Chancellor’s trenchant opposition to the expansion of Leeds Bradford airport, which would affect her constituency. Having

been around since the days of the terminal 5 planning inquiry, I find it clear that the business case for Heathrow expansion rests on significant costs being imposed on taxpayers. They would be expected to foot the bill for the impact on the M4 and the M25, and for the loss of a waste incinerator that provides energy for many local authorities. Can the Minister assure the House that any DCO for Heathrow that comes forward will be subject to no less rigour and no less consultation than those brought forward in the past?

Mike Kane: I can assure the hon. Gentleman of that. SAF was stuck in the muck under the last Government; we waited years for announcements, and we have done more on that in six months than Tory Administrations did in 14 years. We are investing in cleaning up aviation fuel and funding technology on contrails, so that the air people breathe is always as clean as we can make it.

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): In a spirit of cross-party collaboration, I praise the shadow spokesperson, the hon. Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), for expertly outlining some of the logistical challenges of Heathrow expansion. It is a surprise and a shame that the Tories did not answer those questions before voting for expansion in 2018 when in government. Does the Minister agree that any future application for Heathrow expansion—we do not yet have one—must address and solve those key issues, look at those logistical challenges, and say how expansion is compatible with our climate commitments, and with local concerns about air quality, pollution, noise and congestion?

Mike Kane: My hon. Friend is exactly right. Our four tests remain, and they have to be passed. Again, we are speculating that a development consent order will come before us. I am sure that he, as a doughty campaigner for his constituents, will make his voice heard.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): The economic benefits of the expansion of London airports remain unproven. On Heathrow, the Department for Transport's updated appraisal report shows that the net present value of a third runway ranges from just £3.3 billion to minus £2.2 billion, while Heathrow's finances are of severe concern, due to the significant debt that it has incurred. What new economic analysis have the Government considered that makes a third runway at Heathrow viable when considered alongside their commitments on climate, noise and air quality?

Mike Kane: I say again what I said earlier: capacity in London is at 76% on average, and at 95% at Gatwick and Heathrow. What is the Liberal Democrat answer to that? Do we not want people to fly across the world to bang the drum for British business? Do we not want them to visit their friends and family? Are the Liberal Democrats for constraining people's flying? There are a lot of questions, but no answers from Liberal Democrat Members.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I voted against the framework for Heathrow airport in 2018 because I was not satisfied that the legislation before us would deal with air quality, noise, climate change and surface access issues. Does my hon. Friend agree that if we are to go ahead with a third runway at Heathrow, we

must satisfy ourselves in this House that those issues have been addressed, and that they cannot be set aside by developers once they have permission to go ahead?

Mike Kane: My hon. Friend is exactly right. Those tests must be met, including through the development consent order. Just for the record, I voted for the framework in 2018, because I thought that it passed those tests.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): Many of my constituents in Wetherby and Easingwold use Leeds Bradford airport, and the same will be true of the constituents of the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Wakefield and Rothwell (Simon Lightwood). For years, I have wanted expansion of Heathrow so that morning flights from Yorkshire could come down to Heathrow airport, allowing transatlantic flights to be boarded in Yorkshire. May I urge the Minister, when considering the expansion of Heathrow, to always give firm attention to regional airports, especially Leeds Bradford airport in Yorkshire? It would allow the economy to grow significantly if people could check in at Leeds and get off in New York.

Mike Kane: I could not agree more with the right hon. Member, though it pains me to say it. We have five great northern runways stretching from John Lennon to Manchester, Leeds Bradford and Newcastle, and we should be focusing on regional connectivity in particular. On Leeds Bradford, my recollection is that because of the lack of decision making by the last Government, confidence was lost in its development. Let us see if we can get a framework for improving connectivity at Leeds Bradford, including for those in the constituency of the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield and Rothwell (Simon Lightwood).

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I came to London yesterday by rail, as usual, and I must say that both Lumo and London North Eastern Railway are doing a fantastic job of getting people out of planes and on to trains between Edinburgh and London. *[Interruption.]* I always like to talk about trains. I am concerned that any increase in air capacity will take people off trains and help them make less sustainable transport choices. Will the Minister commit to speaking with the Rail Minister to understand any impacts of airport expansion on that service?

Mike Kane: My hon. Friend is exactly right: we have to join up the modes of transport. We have had a broken transport system as a result of 14 years of complete under-investment. Whether we are talking about rail connectivity to Glasgow, what will happen if a Heathrow development consent order comes forward, or just getting Northern trains working across the north of England, linking up Leeds Bradford, Liverpool, Manchester and Newcastle will be a key start to improving jobs and growth at those airports.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): In order to meet the problem of increasing demand for flights, what are the Government doing to improve rail connections with western Europe, including direct trains to Germany as well as Holland?

Mike Kane: I think that that involves fixing the problems with Eurostar. We are seeing others coming into that market, and European Union colleagues are running overnight long-distance train services, which are reducing the need for aviation across the continent and reducing carbon. We should be ambitious as a country that we can tap into that network. The right hon. Gentleman is right on this matter.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): Newcastle International airport tells me that Heathrow expansion would mean increased access to global markets for north-east businesses, new destinations for north-east tourists and easier access to our brilliant north-east universities for students from around the world. More broadly, given that air travel's 5% of emissions are dwarfed by road travel emissions, does the Minister agree that the important work that his Department is doing to promote electric vehicles and the work that the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero is doing on the decarbonisation of the electricity network is fundamental to demonstrating to my constituents that addressing climate change is not about saying no to travel and transport, but about saying yes to an economy that works for people and the planet?

Mike Kane: We have made tough decisions about the phasing out of internal combustion engines up to 2030. When I visited Newcastle airport, I saw a wonderful operation—it is also producing solar energy to power its operation. We need better connectivity between Newcastle and London, and I have raised that with carriers. If we are to develop our offshore wind, carbon capture and green energy technology, it must be linked up with the cruise industry, Newcastle airport and the great north-east coast that provides so many jobs, services and industries for people across our nation.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I have been enjoying the Minister's lively presentation, but then I do not live under a potential new flightpath. Are the Government consulting their Back Benchers about the possibility of aviation and airport expansion versus net zero? If so, will they be advising them to clean up what they have said on this subject on the internet before it is hoovered up by the Opposition in preparation for the next general election?

Mike Kane: There has been a lot of AI news in the press today. I say gently to the right hon. Gentleman that I grew up under a flightpath in my home town in Wythenshawe and Sale East. I grew up under the BAC-111s, the Tridents, the Concorde and the Guppys. *[Interruption.]* I see that my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Withington (Jeff Smith) agrees with me. I remember how dirty, noisy and smelly those planes were. Technology has come forward leaps and bounds, and the noise envelope around most of our airports has reduced considerably. Through our investments, we hope to improve the technology further under this Government and the next.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney) (Lab): This weekend, *The Sunday Times* featured a great cartoon by Morten Morland showing the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Energy Secretary tearing up a Whitehall office looking for the growth lever. I am a supporter of

the Welsh freeports programme and airport expansion where there is environmental mitigation. Will the Minister please say more about the Government's sustainable aviation plans and the use of low-carbon tech to help economic growth?

Mike Kane: I thank my hon. Friend for his support for growth at our ports, which includes our maritime ports. There is £63 million for the advanced fuels fund and £1 billion for the Aerospace Technology Institute to look at net zero emissions. We have already introduced—it was almost the Government's first act out of the gate; it came into force on 1 January—the SAF mandate, so this year 2% of all fuel will have to be from a sustainable source, and we will shortly legislate on the revenue certainty mechanism to kick-start the SAF industry in the UK. The Government could not have done more in the six months we have had in office.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): I note that the Minister did not mention noise pollution in his statement. As he grew up under a flightpath, I hope that he enjoyed the noise. Eight routes currently pass over my constituency, sometimes after midnight. My constituents struggle with the noise—one said that it was like having an uninvited dinner guest every night. It not only disturbs sleep but has profound health implications. With that in mind, is the Minister going to ignore the health impacts of a third runway?

Mike Kane: I cannot comment on the third runway because there is no development consent order before us, but the hon. Lady makes an extraordinarily valid point about noise. That is why the Liberal Democrats should get behind us and support airspace modernisation. We have an analogue system in a digital age, which was designed more for the days when Yuri Gagarin went into space than for today. We can give people under flightpaths more choice in future by differentiation, if we have a better system of airspace modernisation.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): My local airport, Stansted, is a huge employer for residents in my constituency, and it has led the way in developing sustainable aviation fuel. Does the Minister agree that sustainable aviation fuel is vital to achieving our decarbonisation targets?

Mike Kane: Sustainable aviation fuel is vital to meeting our climate targets. I commend Manchester Airports Group, which includes Stansted and East Midlands, and Manchester in my own constituency, on its work to decarbonise. It is ahead of the game. It flies one in six people in and out of the UK. When it gets it right, that represents a huge emissions reduction.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that one of the many benefits of a third runway at Heathrow is that it would require the removal of one of the largest waste incinerators in the country? When this matter comes before him, will he ensure that there is no reprovisioning of this monster in a densely populated area, but that we see its deletion altogether so that we deal with waste in a truly sustainable way?

Mike Kane: There is no DCO currently. If one comes forward, I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will make his voice heard.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for repeating what we heard from the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero at the Environmental Audit Committee yesterday: that no plans will be approved unless they are in line with the Government's environmental commitments.

My hon. Friend cannot comment on Gatwick and Luton because they have a live DCO, and he cannot comment on Heathrow because it does not have a live DCO, which is handy. Let me ask him about something that he can comment on. What changes will we make to ensure that any airport expansion plans are in line with our environmental commitments? Can he explain more about what the offsets will be to ensure that the Government are able to meet the commitments that he has confirmed they will make?

Mike Kane: I thank my hon. Friend for his chairmanship of the Environmental Audit Committee, of which I was a proud member for many years, looking at the circular economy, which this Government are taking forward. The Government have committed to delivering greener transport, including through SAF, airspace modernisation and the other measures that I laid out. I am proud of that range of measures. The Front-Bench across this Department are decarbonising the transport sector further and faster in the first six months of this Government than in 14 years of the last.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): The Minister has made a great deal of the position of my party on Heathrow airport. As he is such a fan of our Focus leaflets, I am sure he will know from my own that I have consistently raised airport noise, opposition to the expansion of Heathrow, sustainable aviation fuel and airspace management in this place. How will he make the airspace management plan fit with any forthcoming emissions and capacity management framework? We have yet to hear from the Government about that, but the Liberal Democrats consider it vital to the future sustainability of the air transport industry in this country.

Mike Kane: I am generally very grateful for the Liberal Democrats' support for airspace modernisation. It is complicated and difficult. We are throwing our hat over the wall in trying to reach it. It will be easier in certain parts of our country than others, but we have already taken action. We set up the airspace modernisation design service. We are bringing the best and the brightest together. If we can make the planes fly in a straight line, we will use less carbon. It is the lowest of low-hanging fruit for carbon reduction in the aviation sector, and we are moving at pace on it.

Jo White (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I welcome this Government's commitment to the aviation sector. The closure of Doncaster airport on 30 December 2022, with the loss of 800 jobs and the smoothest access to flights in the country, was devastating. The reopening of the airport has been a long-fought campaign that has the backing of my constituents in Bassetlaw. Today, they will be saying: "Bring the flights and the infrastructure to our area." Will the Minister put his shoulder to our campaign?

Mike Kane: Without a doubt. People are proud of their airports. Mine was 80 years old a few years ago, and I saw people turn up in droves to show their pride in aviation in this country. I felt sorry for the people of Doncaster, Sheffield and the environs when they lost their airport. I commend the mayor, the council and the local MPs who have lobbied me relentlessly on this matter. The council now has a deal with the operator, and the first flight took off very recently. I wish them every luck with it, and they will have my full backing to do what needs to be done.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) and others, I want to focus on the role of our regional airports. Surely the Minister would agree that the expansion of some of them could help the Government's growth agenda and provide a boost to local economies. With improved rail connections, many of our regional airports could serve travellers to and from London. The work involved could be completed long before a DCO for Heathrow could be concluded.

Mike Kane: Airports near the hon. Member's constituency will have a key part to play for workers across our nation with respect to the decarbonisation agenda and sustainable fuels, because Immingham sits within his constituency. That will be key to the UK's plans to decarbonise our economy, along with good rail connectivity. Airports are a market within the private sector—planes want to go to particular places—but if we can expand and grow our economy across all our regions, as we hope to, I hope that this will be a golden age for all our airports.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): My right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) was correct to say that this feels like déjà vu. Here we are again, debating huge transport infrastructure expansion in the south-east of England while constituents right across this country, especially in the north-east, think, "What about us?" Does the Minister agree that if expanding transport infrastructure in this country is the key to growth, that growth must happen everywhere?

Mike Kane: I agree. As I have said, airports that make the right decisions in the next few years on improving the airspace and improving their connectivity through surface access all have the potential to grow like my airport has grown exponentially. I urge Members to get behind their airports and support their growth and decarbonisation agendas.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): Globally, half of aviation emissions are a result of flights taken by the wealthiest 1%. In the UK, 70% of flights are taken by the richest 15%. Is expanding aviation capacity not a matter of fairness? It will facilitate the very richest, who are already frequent flyers, to be able to fly more, while the noise, carbon emissions and air pollution impacts will be inflicted on the most ordinary people in society, including the poorest at home and around the world.

Mike Kane: I think it was Woody Allen who said that 80% of success in life is turning up, and I must gently ask once again where the hon. Gentleman was when we were introducing the sustainable aviation mandate in this House. I hope he will be here when we introduce the revenue support mechanism in the months ahead and decarbonise our aviation sector.

I think people have the right to go on holiday at least once a year, to do business across the planet and to visit friends and family. I am not sure what the hon. Gentleman's policies are. If he wants to send them to me, I will put them on one of my Labour roses.

Sally Jameson (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): Following on from the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (Jo White), does the Minister agree that it is important to also support regional airports in the north, including Doncaster airport? The reopening of the airport is supported by all my neighbouring parliamentary colleagues. Together with my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher), I am working with Doncaster council and the South Yorkshire combined authority to get this critical piece of transport infrastructure back. The growth agenda will be a success only if places like Doncaster feel it too. It is important that the people of Doncaster and South Yorkshire can take off once again.

Mike Kane: I have to say, my hon. Friend is so tenacious on this matter that I sometimes go pale when I meet her in the Division Lobby, because every day she asks after it. She is such a campaigner on it. I saw her go around party conference lobbying the industry and airlines to do what her constituents sent her to Parliament to do and to try to come up with a solution for her local airport. I can only commend her tenacity to the House.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): Will the Minister confirm what compensating measures the Government will take, if airport expansion is to go ahead, to ensure adherence to carbon budgets? They must have already been agreed on by now.

Mike Kane: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his considered approach in all these matters. I was pleased to receive him at the Department the other day to talk about a particular constituency issue that related to Gatwick. We do not have a development consent order, but noise and pollution are the tests to meet our climate commitments, and they will remain the tests. It will be up to the Chair of the Transport Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), and Members across this House to hold the Government's feet to the fire on this matter.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): The reopening of Blackpool airport for commercial flights is a top priority for my constituents, as I have raised previously with the Minister. Does he agree that we need to work with our regional airports to deliver the growth and the jobs we need in places such as Blackpool that were forgotten about by the previous Government over 14 years?

Mike Kane: What a breath of fresh air my hon. Friend was in his by-election, and he is now on these Benches, campaigning for his airport in Blackpool.

I am really looking forward to visiting the airport and to my night out there—I hope that will come with fish and chips on the prom, as well.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): The expansion of Heathrow feels a bit like the Schrödinger's cat of expansion at the moment—it is both happening and not happening, depending on what one's perspective is today. I realise that the Minister will not be tempted to comment on Gatwick either, as it is a live DCO process. Given that the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), and the Minister have both asserted that growth is an inevitable consequence of airport expansion, can I ask the Minister what evidence he has to support that assertion?

Mike Kane: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, but I do not think I will take any lectures from Liberal Democrat Members about sitting on the fence. There is the politics of licking their finger, putting it in the air to see which way the wind is blowing, and then putting it in a leaflet. There is no development consent order for Heathrow yet. I am sure the hon. Lady will have her opportunity to raise her concerns at a later date in this place.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): I could not agree more with the Minister when he points out that any airport expansion has to be part of the overall picture of upgrading Britain's broken transport networks. Bracknell sits on the Reading to Waterloo train line, which passes through Feltham, just south of Heathrow. Journey times on the line have not improved since the '70s, and there is no direct connection to Heathrow. Will the Minister assure me that any plans to upgrade airports will be part of the overall picture of an integrated plan?

Mike Kane: My hon. Friend is exactly right. I am not usually quite so divisive at the Dispatch Box, but we inherited such a broken system it is almost untrue, such are the things we are finding out about the sclerotic nature of the previous Government. The Roads Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), is investing £1.6 million in fixing potholes, while the Minister responsible for buses, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield and Rothwell (Simon Lightwood), has invested £1 billion in buses. We are moving fast. We are fixing things and we are delivering.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): As a fellow Greater Manchester MP, the Minister will undoubtedly know that Manchester airport welcomed 30 million passengers through its doors last year, and that 84% of those passengers came to and from the airport by car. He will rightly acknowledge the valid concerns across the House today about the impact of airport expansion on carbon emissions. The carbon footprint of Manchester airport comes only partly from air travel, as a lot of it comes from road travel. What update can the Minister give my constituents on surface access improvements at Manchester airport, so that they can get to and from the airport, whether as passengers or to work, by bus or by train?

Mike Kane: Well, the Conservatives built a road, but it just floods all the time—maybe we can start by dealing with that. The hon. Lady is right that Manchester airport is in my constituency. Mine is actually the most

visited constituency in the north of England; in fact, 30 million people visited it last year alone, although they may not have stayed as long as I would have liked. The airport has been on an incredible journey, especially with its decarbonisation. I hope to meet the airport operators shortly to continue that journey with them.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): It is right that in this debate we all champion our local and regional airports, including Birmingham International. However, the reality is that no other airport is a serious rival to the long-haul hub capacity that Heathrow provides, and its exhaustion of that capacity is a block on growth in every region of the UK. Does the Minister agree that redirection of that pent-up demand to Schiphol and Dubai is no good for the national accounts and no good for the environment?

Mike Kane: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He is a very good campaigner for his local airport and for the public service obligation flights out of that airport. Not making these tough decisions does not mean there is no carbon—it simply means that customers vote with their feet and go to Schiphol, Frankfurt or Charles de Gaulle to hub out to their destinations. We have to look at things in the round when we are talking about decarbonising the UK aviation sector.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): Given the hugely contradictory evidence on whether expanding airport capacity will boost GDP growth, will the Minister explain how the Government can justify prioritising airport expansion over much-needed substantial investment in green travel and public transport, which would benefit the economy in the long term and benefit a far wider group of people in this country than the very small group of wealthy frequent flyers who will benefit from airport expansion?

Mike Kane: I am hearing that Members on the Liberal Democrat Benches are against wealthy people and against our constituents flying, in some cases. There is no bigger champion of active travel in this House than me—except for my ministerial colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield and Rothwell—and I hope to do a lot more on that when it comes to ports and airports. All people, regardless of their income, should have a choice about how they get around. We had a broken system over the past 14 years, which meant people had no choice. Now, they are getting better buses, their potholes are fixed, and we are investing more in active travel than ever before.

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Wickham) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) made an excellent point about hub airports. At the moment, there are 19 flights between my local airport in Newcastle and Heathrow, but 30 a week between Newcastle and Amsterdam. I dare say that some people from the north-east may wish to sample the unique delights of Amsterdam, some will certainly be using Amsterdam as a hub airport, instead of Heathrow. That is bad for our economy, bad for passengers, and, because it is further away than Heathrow, bad for the environment, too. Is it not right that we build hub capacity in this country because it is the best thing to do environmentally?

Mike Kane: I also understand that you can have a good old party on the ferry from the port of Tyne to Amsterdam—I do not know whether my hon. Friend has taken it. He is exactly right. If we do not invest in a hub airport in the UK, people will go point to point outside the UK to transfer to the places they want to go to. That is worse for carbon emissions than us taking responsibility for the decisions we need to make to decarbonise our aviation sector.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I welcome the support the Minister has given to the Chancellor today. He has made it quite clear, if the speculation turns into reality, where he will stand on the issue. That is important, given the need for hub airports to export our goods, build business links and give people the personal freedom to travel across the world. But is he concerned, given the Energy Secretary's obsession with net zero, the large number of Members who seem to be more concerned about long-term climate predictions, uncertain as they may be, than the immediate needs of growth and jobs in this economy, and the potential for lengthy court battles because of our statutory commitments to carbon dioxide reduction, that no investor will look at these projects but will instead continue to look at hub airports in the rest of Europe?

Mike Kane: I thank the right hon. Member, who I know is a campaigner on this. I keep a close eye on all matters of connectivity to Northern Ireland. Investor confidence in aviation is huge: investors are queuing up and looking for opportunities. We must ensure those opportunities come with jobs and growth, but also that they are clean and decarbonise our sector. I say stick with the plan. We will decarbonise the grid and our UK economy, but we can grow it at the same time—the two things are not contradictory.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that it would be irresponsible to kick the can down the runway on airport expansion and other major infrastructure when this country is desperate for growth? We need a Government willing to take the tough decisions to overcome the blockers and get things built in the national interest and in the interests of citizens all around our country.

Mike Kane: I cannot agree more. The Government's defined mission will be growth. The aviation sector is one where we can grow the economy, because it provides the connectivity and the high-skilled, trade unionised jobs that support families and careers right across our country.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Before the Minister asks me where I was during the sustainable aviation fuels debate, I was here. Having 22% SAF by 2040 still means 78% fossil fuels in aircraft fuel—an awful lot. My constituents are impacted by Bristol airport expansion. I meet regularly with my local group Stop Bristol Airport Expansion group. They want to know what impact assessment has been made of the cumulative effect of the additional carbon emissions that will be created by all the proposed airport expansion plans taken together.

Mike Kane: I thank the hon. Member. She is actually right, and well done to her for being there during the SAF debate and supporting the Government.

[Mike Kane]

At the moment, the technology does not exist to fully decarbonise aviation. We are looking at hydrogen, we have the advanced fuels fund and we are investing £1 billion in the ATI, but, as the Prime Minister announced recently when he went to Merseyside, we are investing billions in carbon capture and other technology to offset those emissions. That is what we will have to do in the near future, but I envisage a day when we will have aircraft in our skies, particularly internally in the UK, with zero emissions coming out of their tailpipes.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I welcome the Government's commitment to growth. I also welcome their commitment to taking the difficult decisions required to generate it. We know that any conversations about a third runway will focus on the south, but I would like to ask about the north. May I ask the Minister, in my capacity as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Yorkshire and northern Lincolnshire, if the project is approved, what will be done to ensure that all regions benefit from the proceeds of the growth generated?

Mike Kane: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question and, even from this Lancastrian, for his chairmanship of the APPG for Yorkshire. I will say a couple of things. We have five great northern runways, and we need to begin to improve their capacity and connectivity. That is key to regional economic growth. Hopefully, whoever comes forward with the DCO for Heathrow will, as they have in the past, look at spreading the wealth and at logistic hubs right not just around our country, but Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): My local communities, including Flamstead, Markyate and Wheathampsted, are already plagued by Luton airport and very worried about expansion. If the Minister cannot answer questions about evidence for a positive impact on growth and the economy, can he at least guarantee that the Government will listen to their own climate experts and have a framework in place before any airport expansion?

Mike Kane: Yes, is the answer. We will come forward, very shortly, with a policy framework. We have not had one for many years. It is more than time to update it—the hon. Lady is right.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I very much welcome the Minister's answers—they have been both confident and progressive, which is encouraging for me as the MP for Strangford. My constituents have expressed some concern about the impact on the environment of the potential expansion, but it has been highlighted to me that building for planes to land, so they do not have to

circle, is highly beneficial for the environment. Will the Minister confirm that our environmental obligations have been fully considered in any decisions that are made for the potential expansion of Heathrow? Will there be—I know the Minister will say yes, but I want him to say it on the record—more domestic connections with Belfast International and Belfast City airports?

Mike Kane: The hon. Member is such a doughty campaigner that I think he had an urgent question in the House a few weeks ago when his plane was cancelled! “Well done,” is all I can say. That day we had a really good question and answer session on connectivity in Northern Ireland. We have two great airports in Belfast, and Derry/Londonderry's airport serves the north-west. His first question is about planes flying in a straight line—an obscure piece of policy, which is in our manifesto, called airspace modernisation. We can cut up to 10%, 20% and, I am told in the case of some easyJet flights, even 30% of carbon emissions by just getting planes to go in a reasonably straight line and not circle around. It introduces resilience at airports and makes the passenger experience much better. I hope those on the Opposition Benches will support the policy when it comes to this place.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I thank the Minister for his very full answers to questions, which mean I am now on the seventh or eighth version of my question. [Laughter.] There are two points I would like to explore. First, on emissions, SAF will only ever be a transitional fuel. What effort are the Government making to engage with industry to develop truly zero-carbon power plants, and harness our incredible industry and our companies that can take advantage of the opportunity to lead the real zero-carbon hydrogen electric power plants? Secondly, on noise, the Minister mentions airspace modernisation, which will mean some residents facing greater noise frequency and impacts. Does he agree that the answer to the first question, on next generation power plants, is actually the answer to the second question on noise? Please, will he give us a proper answer on what the Government are doing to take advantage?

Mike Kane: That is the problem when a new Member is called last, but he is agile—mentally on his feet—to get that in. We are investing in hydrogen zero-emission technology, with £1 billion for the ATI. I hope the hon. Gentleman is sat on the Opposition Benches in the months ahead when we implement the revenue certainty mechanisms, so we can kickstart a new age of SAF production in the UK that will bring jobs and growth right across our great country.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the Minister for his responses.

Gaza: Humanitarian Situation

2.19 pm

The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will update the House on the ceasefire agreement in Gaza and detail our latest efforts to get aid to those in desperate need.

This is a fragile ceasefire, but it brings much-needed hope for Israeli and Palestinian people. The agreement to end the fighting and release the hostages is what this Labour Government have been pressing for from the moment we came to office. I thank Qatar, Egypt and the US for their tireless efforts, and echo the Prime Minister in wishing Emily Damari and the other former hostages well as they begin to recover from their horrific ordeals. We continue to call for the immediate release of all those still waiting to be reunited with their loved ones, including the remaining hostages with links to the UK.

Civilians in Gaza have endured suffering that defies belief, and this deal brings hope that they can start to rebuild their lives. In the days since the guns were silenced, Israel has opened up mechanisms to surge in aid. The UN and aid organisations have been working tirelessly to deliver the humanitarian aims of the ceasefire agreement. After so much time waiting at the border—delays that I saw for myself in December—trucks are now streaming in. Partners on the ground report that more than 200,000 food parcels have been dispatched to more than 130 distribution points since the ceasefire. This Government have been at the forefront of the humanitarian effort in Gaza since we came to office—overturning the suspension of funding to UNRWA, and then boosting our support; assisting UK-Med field hospitals to help the injured; working with Egypt to support those medevac-ed out of Gaza; and providing vital resources to UNICEF and the World Food Programme.

Today I am pleased to announce that the UK is investing in the ceasefire. UK support will be distributed to the UN and key medical partners, so that tens of thousands of civilians receive the healthcare, food and shelter that they need. That support will amount to £17 million to get more aid into Gaza and restore services. The figure also includes £2 million for the World Bank to support the construction and restoration of critical water and energy infrastructure. The UK has already helped about 284,000 people in Gaza to access water, sanitation and hygiene services. Today's uplift brings our commitment for the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Palestinian refugees in the region to £129 million this financial year.

I am also pleased to announce that, this morning, Jordanian air force helicopters started landing in Gaza with UK-funded medical supplies and logistical support from UK armed forces. I thank Jordan for its excellent commitment to getting aid in, in such challenging circumstances, and we will continue to support our Jordanian partners in this initiative. However, more action is needed. The air bridge to Gaza is no substitute for road routes, which must remain open. We also call on Israel to allow in more essential items such as tents, mattresses and medical equipment. As people start to move home, basic services need to be put back in place, and unexploded bombs and mines cleared. Without that, even more lives will be lost—and, of course, the UN and humanitarian agencies must be able to operate freely.

The Government have repeatedly stated the need for UNRWA to continue its lifesaving assistance to the people of Gaza, Jerusalem and the west bank. The Knesset legislation taking effect on 30 January risks impeding the progress made since the ceasefire; Israel must allow the agency to continue to operate. The legislation does not and cannot change the fact that Israel has a responsibility under international law to facilitate humanitarian assistance. As the UN Security Council heard last week, 1 million Gazan children need support to process their traumatic experiences—their suffering cannot be understated—and about 15,500 patients need medical evacuation, according to the World Health Organisation. Routes must be opened for them to obtain that treatment.

The UK and the wider international community stand ready to support Palestinians as they begin to rebuild their lives, their homes and their communities. We are under no illusions about the scale of the challenge ahead. The overwhelming majority of homes in Gaza are damaged or destroyed, the economy has collapsed, and basic services, including energy and water, have been knocked out. We are therefore working with partners urgently to find the best ways in which to finance and support recovery and reconstruction efforts. It is essential that the coming surge of assistance is properly co-ordinated, and with the access and security to reach those in need. The Palestinian Authority has a crucial role to play, and we are providing technical and financial assistance to the authority, including assistance to support the urgent recovery of basic services.

The UK has always been clear about the fact that this ceasefire is just the first step. We must build confidence on all sides to help sustain it, progress through all its phases, and turn it into a lasting peace that assures the security of Israelis and Palestinians alike. We in the UK will focus all our efforts on keeping up the momentum, using every diplomatic channel available. As Members will know, the Foreign Secretary and the Minister for the Middle East kept up the drumbeat of engagement during their visits to Egypt and the United Nations last week. We will keep up the pace until every hostage is released, aid reaches all those in need, and Palestinians are able to rebuild their homes and their lives. I commend this statement to the House.

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

2.25 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): Since the savage terrorist attacks of 7 October 2023, all of us in this House have called for the release of all hostages held by Hamas as the only way of reaching a sustainable end to this abhorrent conflict, and to alleviate the enormous scale of the humanitarian suffering. We now feel both the anxiety and the hope of the families who have waited, anticipating the release of the remarkably brave women hostages who have been returned thus far under the ceasefire agreement, including, of course, the British-Israeli hostage Emily Damari. I pay tribute to the families of all the hostages for their unwavering campaigns to secure the release of their loved ones. They should never have been put through this unimaginable nightmare. We did, very sadly, learn yesterday that eight hostages would not be returning home alive, having been killed

[Priti Patel]

at the hands of Hamas. That was devastating news for hostage families who continue to face unbearable uncertainty in the days and weeks ahead.

There is a long road ahead, and—as we have already heard from the Minister—we want the ceasefire agreement to hold, but we stress that every single hostage must be released. The important issue of humanitarian access remains, and, as the Minister has said, we must ensure that the House receives relevant updates both on the hostage releases and on every single diplomatic tool that Britain has when it comes to removing the barriers to getting the hostages out and also getting the right amount of aid in.

We all saw on our television screens yesterday the scenes of thousands of Gazans returning to the north, where, as we recognise, the situation is extremely difficult. Can the Minister give a breakdown of the volume and type of aid that the UK is sending, and how its impact will be measured? Notwithstanding the deliveries by helicopter that she mentioned, is she confident that British aid is getting over the land borders as expected, and is being effectively distributed to help those in need? As for the £17 million that she mentioned, can she clarify whether it is new money or part of money that has been released from previous funding allocations? Can she also tell us which organisations the money will support?

The Minister rightly referred to UNRWA. While no one can doubt the size of its distribution network, we cannot ignore the problems within the organisation. It is in no one's interests to pretend that they have not happened. We know the facts: UNRWA staff and institutions have been infiltrated by Hamas, and there have been shocking allegations of UNRWA staff involvement in the 7 October attacks. Following the United Nations' internal investigations and the subsequent sackings, the Colonna report and reforms need to be implemented in full. Is the Minister overseeing that in order to give our public, as well as donor countries, more confidence in UNRWA and the efficacy of its progress on the vetting of its personnel, and on procedures to protect the neutrality of its operations and facilities? Will she share with the House the evidence of the work that has taken place? In July, the Foreign Secretary announced £21 million for UNRWA, and the Prime Minister announced £13 million last month. What measures are in place to ensure that every penny of British taxpayers' money is going to those most in need and not being abused by Hamas?

Without losing focus on the challenges of the immediate term and phase 1 of the ceasefire, the Government also need to be thinking about what comes next and laying the right foundations for the reconstruction and development that needs to take place in Gaza. This is a huge task. What discussions have the Government had with regional neighbours? What role does the Minister envisage for the UK? Will Britain be contributing financially? Is she pushing for multilateral institutions to be involved?

On the future governance of Gaza, I have said that I would like to hear more about the Government's day one plan. The Foreign Secretary previously told the House:

"There cannot be a role for Hamas."—[*Official Report*, 16 January 2025; Vol. 760, c. 516.]

I echo those words, but the sickening sight of Hamas gunmen parading around hostages just last weekend caused great alarm. What steps are being taken to end the reign of terror that Hamas have unleashed?

The Minister mentioned the Palestinian Authority. If they are to assume responsibility in Gaza, what action will be taken to ensure that they are reforming? They must make serious, measurable and tangible reforms on education, welfare policy and democracy.

Finally, everyone in the House knows that the root cause of so much suffering in the middle east is Tehran and the Iranian regime. Could the Minister speak about the efforts this Government are making to work with the international community on a robust strategy towards the Iranian regime?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her support for the approach being taken by the UK Government. I agree with her about the savagery of the 7 October attacks and the suffering that has been undergone by the families of the hostages. I met the brother of Emily Damari when I was in Tel Aviv. It is difficult to find the words to reflect on that experience and what he was going through at that time. I met the families of other UK-linked hostages when I was in Tel Aviv, and their suffering continues as they await the return of their loved ones, which we are all hoping for fervently.

I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for underlining the need for the ceasefire to hold. We need to see that move through phase 1 into phase 2. It is imperative that those measures are held to by all sides and that we see all hostages being released and then, as she said, the surge of aid into Gaza that is so needed. We will keep the House updated on the diplomatic measures we are taking; we have been doing that consistently across our team in the FCDO, and we will continue to do that.

The right hon. Lady asked whether we are confident that aid will get to where it is needed. Yes, we are. Much of the contribution we have announced today is going from the crisis reserve into the pool arrangement, which is a system designed to ensure that support is going directly into shelter, food and medical supplies. It is critical we ensure that that support is available directly.

The right hon. Lady asked about UNRWA. We have spoken about this before, but to reiterate, when the UK resumed its support for UNRWA, we were very clear that the findings from the Colonna report had to be implemented. In fact, £1 million of the £21 million that we provided to UNRWA at that point was earmarked to support that reform programme. I have discussed this directly with the head of UNRWA, and I know that my colleagues have done so repeatedly. I have also discussed it with UNRWA staff in the region, and I saw for myself that work, particularly around neutrality, when I was in the west bank, so I can assure the right hon. Lady of the UK Government's commitment in that regard.

The right hon. Lady asked about reconstruction and what conversations we have been undertaking in that regard. We have been working with the international community and having many discussions with partners bilaterally about this. Of course, the most important thing is for the ceasefire to hold—I know she would agree with that—but when it comes to reconstruction and recovery, we have been particularly working with the World Bank. She may be aware that it conducted a rapid needs assessment, which is a very helpful process, and that is being updated.

We have also been having those discussions intensely with the Palestinian Authority. The right hon. Lady will be aware that Sir Michael Barber, who has incredible expertise, has been supported by the UK Government to work with the PA. I have seen his work, and I discussed it directly with the PA when I was in the west bank. It is, indeed, aiming at those measurable, tangible reforms, precisely in the areas that she mentioned.

Finally, the right hon. Lady asked me to underline the UK Government's position that there will be no role for Hamas. Absolutely, I will do that again from the Dispatch Box, and the Foreign Secretary has made that very clear indeed.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. Could she expand on the technical and financial assistance that the UK is providing to the Palestinian Authority? We know that there are tens of thousands of tonnes of unexploded ordnance. What is happening about that? Finally, what interventions have the Government made about the imminent closure of the UNRWA warehouse on the west bank?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising those issues, as she has done consistently. First, in terms of how the UK is working with the Palestinian Authority on these issues, that support has included financial assistance around the reform programme but also the direct technical support around the reform programme that is necessary. Substantial reform is needed. There is a clear plan that has been driven by the Palestinian Authority, but we are determined to provide that technical support, and we have been doing so.

The issue of unexploded ordnance is of huge concern, particularly as we see people coming back to their homes, because there is a great danger that, in doing so, they will be impacted. There is a need for education and awareness raising around this, but there is also a need to remove that materiel; that is very important. The UK has been working with other countries and internationally on how we can ensure that that is the case, so that these communities are safe to return to.

Finally, my hon. Friend asked about the storage of UNRWA supplies. We are very clear, as we have been before, that UNRWA must have a key role in delivering humanitarian support and health and education services to Palestinians, whether that is in Gaza, the west bank or the wider region.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): I join colleagues in supporting efforts to uphold the ceasefire agreement and release the hostages. I wish to express my heartfelt condolences to the families of the eight hostages who have been killed by Hamas while taken hostage, and I join Members of the House in calling for the immediate release of all those still waiting to be reunited with their loved ones.

I want to denounce statements made suggesting that Palestinians should be forcibly displaced from their homes to other regions in the middle east. The only clearing out that should be taking place is of the unexploded ordnance across Gaza, where UN de-mining experts estimate that 5% to 10% of all ordnance is unexploded.

What support are the UK Government providing for the safe de-mining of the region and for the unaccompanied children, of whom there are estimated to be 17,000?

Israeli legislation ceasing UNRWA's operations is due to take effect this Thursday, posing a huge risk to the humanitarian response and the delivery of education and primary healthcare. Dismantling UNRWA now, outside a political process, will undermine the ceasefire agreement, sabotage Gaza's recovery and weaken the international humanitarian response. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure the continuity of humanitarian aid to the Occupied Palestinian Territories, given the ongoing existential threat to UNRWA's operations?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for the points she has made. I wish to join her in expressing sincere condolences to the families of those eight hostages who will not be able to be back with their families, as is their right, and as so many of us hoped would be the case. Their families must be suffering intensely now.

The hon. Lady's point about displacement is well made. The UK position is very clear: the UK believes that international humanitarian law must be held to and that it must be feasible and, indeed, a reality that Gazans are able to return to their homes, including in northern Gaza. That has consistently been the UK Government's position.

The hon. Lady asked about mine clearing and unexploded ordnance. As I said, it is really important that those areas are safe for people to come back to. I spoke with some specialists in this area last week. I know how meticulous and difficult the work of removing unexploded ordnance is. The UK is actively engaged with experts and considering what role we might be able to play, but above all, we are ensuring that there is a co-ordinated approach to this across our partners and international institutions.

The hon. Lady asks about children. The situation for children has been a priority for the UK Government, as it was for the previous Government. We have ensured that support from UK-Med is provided for children. Unfortunately, we have seen the pressure on children's health coming through. The UK was heavily involved in seeking to deal with polio through the vaccination campaign, and we will continue to ensure that we do what we can to support children, particularly following the trauma that they have experienced.

Finally, on the issue of UNRWA, the hon. Lady is absolutely right: the deadline is coming up speedily and is in two days' time. The UK Government remain absolutely committed to our position that no other organisation can operate at the scale or depth of UNRWA. It is absolutely essential for providing both direct humanitarian supplies and health and education services to Palestinians, and we will continue to make that very clear, as we have done repeatedly, to our Israeli counterparts, multilaterally and to our other partners as well.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): I am glad to hear of the uplift in funding for Gaza, and I share the Minister's serious concerns about the effective ban on UNRWA coming into force this week. Of course, 60% of the food that has entered Gaza during the ceasefire has been delivered through UNRWA, which plays a vital lifesaving and stabilising role in the west bank by providing education to 50,000 Palestinian children, as well as healthcare, clean water and rubbish collection. What

[*Laura Kyrke-Smith*]

reassurances has the Minister had from Israel that if UNRWA can no longer operate, there is a viable and humane alternative way of getting support to the Palestinians?

Anneliese Dodds: Like other Members of the House, my hon. Friend has considerable experience of these issues, with a background in humanitarian services. The UK Government are very clear that UNRWA underpins the entire humanitarian response in Gaza. It has a vital role in delivering the uplift in humanitarian assistance that we need to see following the ceasefire and, as she rightly mentioned, education and health services. We are opposed to the Knesset legislation that was previously passed, and we call on Israel to work urgently with international partners, including the UN, so that there is no disruption to this vital work.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): May I commend the Development Minister on her statement to the House today? I think she would agree that it continues the drive and commitment of the last Government. I particularly applaud her for making it clear that the policy of the British Government is that any plans for the future governance of Gaza will involve a reformed Palestinian Authority and categorically rule out any role for Hamas. In a week when we have seen the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz and the release of terrified young hostages, does she agree that it is deeply depressing that antisemitism is alive and well, and often expressed through hatred of Israel?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his remarks, and I am indeed grateful for the work undertaken by the previous Government when it came to humanitarian support in this area. Obviously, we have sought to build on that and deepen it, and to make sure that we are at the forefront of our responsibilities in this area. I am happy to confirm that he summarised the position of the UK Government when it comes to the future of Gaza. It must be a future that is determined by Palestinians and Gazans themselves, with the PA having a role, but not Hamas.

On the issue of antisemitism, in this week of all weeks, we must redouble all our efforts to ensure that we never forget the horrors of the Holocaust, and that we always resolve to combat any form of prejudice and discrimination, including antisemitism.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): May I thank our colleagues on the Front Bench for the work that they have done, and for the commitment that they have shown? To ensure that we do our best to deliver, today's focus on Gaza is critical, but my concern is that Gaza could easily be destabilised by what is happening in the west bank, particularly the invasion of the Tulkarm refugee camp in the last few days and the killing of further Palestinians. May I ask our Government to make representations to the Israeli Government to show restraint and to prevent the further loss of Palestinian lives through attacks by the IDF?

Anneliese Dodds: As my right hon. Friend rightly says, stability in the west bank is crucial to ensuring that the fragile ceasefire in Gaza can last. All sides must work to ensure a lowering of tension in the west bank at

this time. I can reassure him that we have continued to call on the Israeli authorities to exercise restraint, adhere to international law, and clamp down on the actions of those who seek to inflame tensions, which is in no one's interest.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Before the current crisis, construction in Gaza was made much more difficult by the surprisingly long list of proscribed materials, which included things like drain pipes, which Israel feared could be used as componentry for weapons and was understandably uncomfortable with. What can we do to ensure that the strip can be rebuilt, with all the materials that will require, while giving Israel reassurance on diversion of materials by Hamas—or what remains of it—and other Iranian proxies?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for asking that critical question. He is right to suggest that a key enabler of Gaza's recovery will be the ability to get goods and materials in at the required pace and scale. Our position is that the enabling conditions for early recovery must be provided in the coming weeks, including secure access corridors, which are really important, and the resumption of basic services.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement and the announcement of additional vital UK support for Palestinians at this crucial time, and I join her in recognising the central work of Jordan. Will she join me in condemning the legislation passed against UNRWA by the Israeli Knesset, which jeopardises the entire international humanitarian response in Gaza? What concrete action will our Government take if the Israeli Government move ahead with implementing that legislation at the end of this week?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for underlining the role of Jordan. On both my visits to Jordan, I saw for myself how committed the Jordanians have been to ensuring that aid gets into Gaza. We are really grateful to them for that, and for the partnership that they have shown with the UK.

When it comes to the legislation on UNRWA, the UK Government have been very clear that the decision by the Knesset was wrong. It will undermine the ceasefire and prevent the delivery of much-needed humanitarian aid, and prevent the delivery of education and healthcare. That is why, once again, we call on Israel to change tack and not implement the legislation.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): Over the weekend, President Trump inserted himself into the debate on the future of Gaza and its people by saying,

"You're talking about probably a million and a half people, and we just clean out that whole thing."

Is it the Government's view that he was talking about the forced displacement or ethnic cleansing of almost 2 million Palestinians from their land? If that is not the Government's understanding of what he meant, what exactly is their interpretation of what President Trump said?

Anneliese Dodds: The UK Government recognise the critical role that both the current and previous Administration in the US played in obtaining the ceasefire, as well as the efforts of Qatar and Egypt. On the hon. Gentleman's question about whether Gazans are able to return, they must be allowed to return. That is very clear under international humanitarian law, as he knows.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for coming to the House with this statement. I am sure that Members across the House are watching to ensure that this agreement lasts, and that people can return to their home and build some sort of future. Tomorrow I am due to meet the Kennington Bethlehem Link, a voluntary group in my constituency dedicated to helping Palestinians caught up in the conflict. It has raised with me the alarming situation in the Aida camp, an UNRWA-funded refugee camp between Bethlehem and Jerusalem. Sadly, the Israel Defence Forces have repeatedly vandalised the camp and intimidated workers. The Minister has outlined the situation on UNRWA funding. Given that Israel is due to sever ties with UNRWA later this week, can she please look at urgently directing any support that the UK can give to the Aida camp?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the critical role of UK civil society in supporting people, whether in Gaza, the west bank or the broader region. That really is incredibly important. I am also grateful to her for raising the issue of aid workers' safety. This has been the most deadly conflict for a very long time—in fact, I believe since records began on these matters—for humanitarian workers. Of course, the UK Government will look closely at where our support is being provided, as I said to the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), and ensure that it is getting to where it is needed.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): We saw horrendous scenes at the weekend of Hamas terrorists parading the brave hostages before they were returned, and shooting fellow Palestinians for alleged collaboration. Also, the Hamas leader and his team have vowed to return to rule Gaza, and to carry out repeated atrocities like those that were committed on 7 October. That shows that Hamas are not going away. It is quite clear that they are determined to get back in control in Gaza. We all agree that Hamas should not be in charge of Gaza, so the key issue is: how will that be achieved?

Anneliese Dodds: I agree with the hon. Member on those scenes. The Foreign Secretary has been very clear about this, including from this Dispatch Box. The UK Government's position could not be clearer: Hamas is a terrorist organisation. It must not play a role in future arrangements for Gaza, and we will seek to work with all our international partners, and indeed with the UN, towards that end.

Matthew Patrick (Wirral West) (Lab): While Hamas were busy smuggling weapons, and spending money building tunnels in which to hold hostages ahead of their barbaric attack on 7 October, the people of Gaza relied each and every day on aid coming in. For those of us who want a two-state solution with a peaceful and prosperous Palestine, will the Minister set out her assessment

of the long-term role that UNRWA can play in that, and how we can ensure that aid gets to those who need it, not to the terrorists who are trying to take it away?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the importance of the lodestar of the two-state solution, which we must always aim at. Israelis and Palestinians rightly deserve a state of security, and the sovereignty that he is committed to. On the role of UNRWA, we have had many discussions with its leadership and other international partners. Ultimately, a two-state solution would enable the normalisation of the economy that is needed, and hopefully a shift away from the humanitarian problems there have been for so many years. My hon. Friend mentioned reconstruction, and we are discussing that with a number of UN partners, but I would again mention the World Bank, which has been doing so much work, particularly on how finance can be accessed. Of course, a precondition for that is the ceasefire holding, which we continue to push for.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): According to the UN, 1.9 million people in Gaza are currently displaced, which is 90% of the population. Half of them are children. How will the Minister work to secure the right of return and self-determination for Palestinians in Gaza, especially in the light of the calls from the US President to “clean out” Palestinians from the region?

Anneliese Dodds: The figure that the hon. Member quoted is right, and in some cases Gazans have been moved up to nine times because of recent events. She described Gazans as having the right of return, and I would underline that word “right”. They do have that right. That is clear under international humanitarian law, and it is a right that the UK will seek to ensure becomes a reality.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): We must build confidence on both sides to help sustain the peace, but how are we going to do it? There are 70,000 families who left Palestine before the war and never got back. Many of them still have their keys. I have seen friends and families who never got back to see their grandparents, or who got back once a year. How can we build anybody's confidence to move out of the destruction, particularly in northern Gaza, while it gets rebuilt? We cannot do that. How will we build the confidence of the families and loved ones of the hostages who are still being held there? They fear that Netanyahu will sacrifice them so that the war will return; the IDF says that there will not be a second phase of this peace. How do we build confidence? My heart is with everybody involved. I know that people want peace, but these are the facts. We have to identify and resolve the risks. I do not know how we will do it. God knows.

Anneliese Dodds: The passion with which my hon. Friend speaks is shared by many Members in this House. It can sometimes be almost impossible to see a way through, particularly after a conflict in which so many thousands of people were killed, but it is the UK's responsibility, working multilaterally with our partners, to reach towards a peaceful future in which there are two states, and Palestinians and Israelis can live in security. We must aim towards that. It is particularly important for all of us parliamentarians, and the UK Government, not to shift away from this crisis as the

[Anneliese Dodds]

media coverage starts to diminish in days and weeks to come. We must keep up the pressure, so that we can ensure the future that the Israelis and the Palestinians deserve.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Deradicalisation must form a key plank of any plan for reconstruction in Gaza, along with ensuring that Hamas have no role in its future running, as the Minister says. However, a sickening reality on the ground is that in textbooks and school curriculums in UNRWA schools in Gaza, there are materials that promote antisemitism, that incite hate against Jews and Israel, and that promote violence. Unless we stamp out that hateful incitement to violence that is being put in front of schoolchildren in Gaza, there can be no successful and peaceful future. What is the Minister doing in her conversations with UNRWA to stamp that out in its schools?

Anneliese Dodds: The issue of what is often called the neutrality of UNRWA is incredibly important, and I have discussed it in detail with the leadership of UNRWA. I have also gone to see this in practice, to understand the reforms that have been undertaken. We talked previously about the important Colonna report, which set out practical steps to deliver that neutrality. The UK Government have directly supported that; we earmarked £1 million of funding for it—part of the £21 million that we announced some weeks ago—so we are absolutely committed to this, and to those reforms being not just implemented, as many of them have been, but sustained.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Ind): No one can fail to be moved by the powerful scenes of Palestinians returning to their homes in Gaza, even though their homes have been reduced to rubble by Israeli forces. Of course, it is important that we do everything we can to rebuild Gaza, but justice for war crimes is also important. Does the Minister agree that we must stand up to all those who wish to undermine the International Criminal Court's investigations and do all we can to ensure that justice is done?

Anneliese Dodds: I think we have all seen on our television screens those scenes of Gazans returning to their homes, which in many cases have been destroyed or heavily damaged. Of course, many of those people will also have lost family members, so this has been an incredibly difficult process for many Gazans. My hon. Friend talks about the International Criminal Court, and the UK Government have made it absolutely clear that the UK respects the independence of the International Criminal Court.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I will finish this statement at quarter past 3. Please can questions be a great deal shorter and, with respect, Minister, the answers as well?

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): I welcome the Minister's statement. The suffering of civilians in Gaza is extreme, and I share her call for the immediate release of all those still waiting to be reunited with their loved ones.

Does the Minister agree that we urgently need accountability for the Israeli Government's violations of international law, as exhibited in the restriction of access to tents, mattresses, medical equipment and so on? Does she acknowledge that the only way we will make meaningful progress towards reconstruction efforts and longer-term peace is to hold the Israeli Government to account for these actions?

Anneliese Dodds: The UK is fully committed to international law and respects the independence of both the ICC and the ICJ. Yes, there must be access to such supplies.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement and the announcement of additional investment in aid to Gaza, which is very welcome. I have visited UNRWA schools and healthcare facilities in the west bank, and the role that UNRWA plays in the provision of essential services, including aid to Palestinians, is unique and irreplaceable. The implementation of the Knesset's decision to ban UNRWA could therefore amount to the denial of health services, education and essential aid to a population that has already suffered unbearably for the past 15 months. Can the Minister say not only that the UK Government oppose the decision, but what will be done to hold the Israeli Government to account for the impact of that decision, if it is implemented later this week?

Anneliese Dodds: The UK has already acted to make it clear that there must be a resolution to this urgent issue. We have joined allies in expressing our deep concerns about the Knesset's vote on UNRWA. We have urged Israel to ensure that UNRWA can continue its lifesaving work, including at the UN Security Council on 6 November, 11 December and 3 January.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): Today is the ninth day of the siege on Jenin in the west bank by Israeli forces accused of war crimes. With over 3,000 Palestinians forcibly displaced, Jenin hospital under lockdown without water or electricity, and at least 14 people killed by the Israelis since the beginning of the ceasefire in Gaza, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has said that it is deeply concerned by the use of unlawful, lethal force in Jenin, including multiple airstrikes and apparently random shooting at unarmed residents. Can the Minister tell the House what specific and concrete steps the Government are taking or will take to facilitate an end to Israel's siege and ethnic cleansing in the west bank?

Anneliese Dodds: The hon. Gentleman asks about the UK Government's representations in relation to the west bank, and we have been very clear that the risk of instability is serious and the need for de-escalation is urgent. We continue to call on Israeli authorities to exercise restraint, to adhere to international law and to clamp down on the actions of those who seek to inflame tensions.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Wyre) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's update on the Government's efforts to get aid to those in need in Gaza. Given the serious allegations of war crimes occurring in Gaza, what steps are the Government taking to ensure that they are properly investigated and that those responsible are held to account?

Anneliese Dodds: As I have said, the UK is fully committed to international law and respects the independence of the ICJ and the ICC. Any such determination on the conduct of war by whichever party would be taken by those independent bodies, by experts and by judicial actors and lawyers, not by Governments.

Mr Lee Dillon (Newbury) (LD): In following your request for brevity, Madam Deputy Speaker, may I ask the Minister when is the correct time to recognise Palestine as a state?

Anneliese Dodds: The hon. Gentleman will know that the UK Government are committed to recognising Palestine, but we are committed to doing so in a manner that ultimately supports the peace process. The Foreign Secretary set that out in detail from this Dispatch Box just a few days ago.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Ind): When the Ukraine war started, a mechanism was put in place for the evacuation of injured children from Ukraine to hospitals here to ensure that they had appropriate treatment. It seemed to work effectively, and it was the right thing to do. In the light of the ceasefire in Gaza and the fact that northern Gaza's healthcare facilities have been decimated, will the Government now instigate a scheme for the seriously injured children of Gaza, including orphans, as we did for Ukraine, by establishing a system to ensure that they can be brought here for medical treatment?

Anneliese Dodds: It is vital that Israel ensures sustained passage for patients who need treatment that is not available in Gaza during the first phase of the ceasefire. We announced £1 million for the Egyptian Ministry of Health and Population, delivered through WHO Egypt, to support Palestinians medically evacuated from Gaza. Officials from all relevant Whitehall Departments are exploring avenues to ensure that our support best meets the needs of critically ill people in Gaza.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): We welcome the release of the hostages, though for eight families it will be a sad day as they realise that their loved ones were murdered in captivity. Israel has taken considerable risks by withdrawing troops, opening borders and agreeing to the ceasefire, while Hamas continue to attack in the west bank and continue to humiliate hostages to show that they are in control. Given that Hamas have previously used aid to exercise control of the Palestinian population, and given the huge links between UNRWA and Hamas, what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that UK aid is not used by Hamas to re-exercise control in Gaza?

Anneliese Dodds: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the devastating time that the families of those eight hostages are going through. It is really terrible, and it is important to underline that. At the same time, there is extreme relief for those who have been able to return to their families. The UK has consistently worked hard on this. We need to ensure that aid gets to where it is really needed. We have been working on that with a number of UN agencies, as well as with bodies like UK-Med.

Ian Byrne (Liverpool West Derby) (Ind): At the weekend, President Trump called for a "clean out" of the Gaza strip, proposing to forcibly deport Gaza's more than

2 million Palestinian inhabitants. That would amount to ethnic cleansing and a crime against humanity. Will the Minister join me in condemning President Trump's remarks, and will she set out what action the UK Government would take to prevent the ethnic cleansing of Gaza?

Anneliese Dodds: I refer my hon. Friend to my previous remarks. The UK Government have been very clear that Gazans must be able to return to their homes. That is a matter of international humanitarian law.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): Despite genocide, displacement and destruction, Palestinians are returning to northern Gaza and remain rooted in their land. In respect of President Trump's remarks, the Minister has been asked a number of times about what appears to be yet another forced displacement. What is the position of the Minister and her Government in respect of President Trump's remarks?

Anneliese Dodds: I have said perhaps five times that the UK Government are absolutely clear that Gazans must be able to return to their homes, including in northern Gaza. That is a very clear matter of international law.

Mr James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement and her even-handedness, both in stating the British Government's position on increased aid to UNRWA and in confirming that there can be no role for Hamas in future governance. The UK has a strong track record of bringing people together across communities to build peace, no more so than in Northern Ireland. What lessons on support for civil society and peacebuilding in Israel and Palestine will the Government draw from the last Labour Government's experience in Northern Ireland?

Anneliese Dodds: My hon. Friend is right to be clear that the UK has considerable expertise in the area of peacebuilding, as it does on so many other questions that we have been discussing this afternoon. It will be important in future that we do all we can as a country to pursue that goal of peace: the two-state solution that we talked about before. However, we must, in these immediate months, make sure that the ceasefire is held too.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): The fundamental issue is Israel's occupation of Gaza and the west bank. What assurances has the Minister had from the Israeli Government that they will withdraw all their forces from Gaza and that they will eventually, if not sooner, withdraw from the west bank to allow the Palestinian people to decide their own future in peace?

Anneliese Dodds: I have discussed many of those matters directly with Israeli Government counterparts. I have also been to the west bank so that I could understand the situation with illegal settlements more directly. The UK Government's position is very clear: illegal settlements are illegal. They are not allowed under international law and we remain determined to make that very clear, not just to the Israeli Government but to all our other partners and multilaterally as well.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement and for the Foreign Office's diplomatic efforts in securing the early release of Emily Damari, which we have all been hoping and praying for here in the House. Will the Minister assure the House that she will use those same diplomatic efforts to secure the early release of British-related hostages in phase 1 and to ensure that the next phase of the deal is agreed?

Anneliese Dodds: We are absolutely determined to do all that we can to ensure that the UK-linked hostages who remain—Eli Sharabi, Oded Lifshitz and Avinatan Or—are brought home to their loved ones. We call for their immediate release and will do all in our power to secure that.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): No one can gainsay the need for humanitarian aid, but looking forward to the reconstruction phase, what enforceable assurances are there that aid provided by this Government will not be diverted to rebuilding terrorist tunnels, as happened in the past? Can the Minister trust the United Nations Relief and Works Agency when it comes to that, given its record and given the suggestions that tunnels were built under its very headquarters and that there was a data centre there flowing off UNRWA's electricity supply? Can we place trust in an organisation with such a record?

Anneliese Dodds: Absolutely, the prevention of diversion of aid, not just in this context but more broadly wherever the UK is providing aid, is incredibly important. We take it very seriously indeed and we will always seek to ensure that there is absolutely watertight control around that, wherever UK taxpayers' money is being used—as it is here—to support some of the people most in crisis on earth. The hon. Gentleman asked about the issue of UNRWA's neutrality. We have covered that previously in the statement, but I just point again to the work that the UK has undertaken by providing support for UNRWA to implement the Colonna report.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): There are about a million children in Gaza. To put that in context, we have about a million children in Scotland too. Before I was elected, I worked for Save the Children and I have met the children of the Palestinian refugee camps. Of course, we welcome the ceasefire, which is long overdue. Those children now face

homelessness, hunger and a lack of access to medical supplies, not to mention a disruption in their education. All children's lives are equal, whether they be Scottish or Gazan. What are the UK Government doing to protect the children of Gaza at this time?

Anneliese Dodds: We are deeply alarmed by the disproportionate impact of the conflict on children in Gaza. My hon. Friend talked about education, and I will just mention that area, in the interests of time. He is right about the extreme disruption: at least 88% of school buildings will need full or major reconstruction and most, if not all, students in Gaza have not had access to education since 7 October. The UK has been supporting work on that, including through the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs and UNRWA.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Kim Johnson to ask the final question.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): Since the ceasefire, we have seen an increase in killings and atrocities in Jenin. On Saturday, Israeli forces were responsible for the killing of a two-year-old girl. The extremist settlers are acting with impunity against the Palestinians. Will the Minister explain what actions this Government have taken to put pressure on Israel to prevent the ongoing atrocities in the west bank?

Anneliese Dodds: The UK Government have been absolutely clear on that. Settler expansion and settler violence have reached record levels. The Israeli Government seized more of the west bank in 2024 than in the past 20 years. That is completely unacceptable. The matter has been raised by a number of members of the ministerial team, not least the Foreign Secretary. He also announced new sanctions in October, which targeted illegal settler outposts and organisations that had supported violence against communities in the west bank.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the Minister for her statement. As a point of clarity, Members need to be present in the Chamber for the Minister's statement if they wish to ask a question.

Sudan and Eastern DRC

3.16 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on the situation in Sudan and eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The latest conflict in Sudan has now lasted 21 months. This weekend, the Rapid Support Forces attacked the last functional hospital in the besieged city of El Fasher, in Darfur. The World Health Organisation assesses that some 70 patients and their families were killed. The attack is far from isolated. In recent weeks, the RSF shelled the Zamzam camp where displaced people are trapped outside El Fasher, while there are disturbing reports of extrajudicial killings by militias aligned to the Sudanese armed forces in Wad Madani.

The Government condemn those attacks in the strongest possible terms. They show callous disregard for international humanitarian law and innocent Sudanese civilians. Exact figures for those killed and displaced in Sudan are hard to come by, but we know aid is being blocked from reaching those in need. This is, without a shadow of doubt, one of the biggest humanitarian catastrophes of our lifetime.

I saw that for myself last week in Adré, on the Chad-Sudan border, in the first ever Foreign Secretary visit to Chad. I felt a duty to confront the true horror of what is unfolding, to bear witness and to raise up the voices of those—mainly women—suffering so horrendously. Eighty-eight per cent of the refugees at the Adré crossing are women and children. I met nurses in a clinic fighting to save the lives of starving children. I met a woman who showed me her scars. She had been burned, she had been beaten and she had been raped.

Turning to DRC, conflict has gripped the east for more than 30 years. An M23 rebel offensive at the start of this year had already seized Masisi and Minova. This weekend saw them enter Goma, the region's major city, which M23 last occupied in 2012. Brave UN peacekeepers from South Africa, Malawi and Uruguay have tragically been killed, and with hundreds of thousands having already fled M23 to Goma, there is potential for a further humanitarian catastrophe.

I have not yet travelled as Foreign Secretary to meet those fleeing eastern DRC, but the reports speak for themselves. This is one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a woman or a girl. Children as young as nine are being attacked and mutilated by machete-wielding militias. Around a quarter of the DRC's population are facing acute food insecurity, and there is frequent bombardment of the makeshift camps that shelter those who have fled their homes.

I regret to say that Foreign Secretaries updating the House on conflicts in Africa is something of a rarity. As I discussed yesterday with African ambassadors and high commissioners, the surge in global conflict includes the number in Africa almost doubling in the past decade. This is causing untold damage and holding back economic growth—the bedrock of our future partnership with African countries. But where is the outrage? Again and again in Adré, I was asked, "What is the world doing to help us?" The truth is that if we were witnessing the horrors of El Fasher and Goma on any other continent

or, for that matter, seeing the extremist violence in the Sahel and Somalia anywhere else in the world, there would be far more attention across the western world. Indeed, one recent survey of armed conflict in 2024 contained spotlights on Europe, Eurasia, Asia and the Americas, but none on Africa. There should be no hierarchy of conflicts, but there is one. Every human life is of equal worth.

The impact of these wars is clear for all to see. We have only to be willing to look. I could not face atrocities such as these and shrug my shoulders. However, the House will also recognise the UK's national interest in addressing these conflicts. Irregular migration from Sudan to Britain alone increased by 16% last year. Unscrupulous smuggling gangs are looking to profit from the misery in places such as Sudan and the DRC. The longer these wars last, the greater their ripple effects. Neighbours such as Chad are working hard to manage this crisis alongside others nearby, but further escalation only increases instability and the risks of conflict elsewhere. With Sudan sitting along the major trade routes of the Red sea and eastern DRC, one of the most resource-rich regions in the world, this is something that we cannot tolerate.

This Government, therefore, refuse to let these conflicts be forgotten. Working with Sierra Leone, the UK prepared a UN Security Council resolution on Sudan to address the humanitarian crisis. Shockingly, despite the support of every other member, including China, Russia wielded its veto, but Russian cynicism will not deter us. We will continue to use our Security Council seat to shine a light on what is happening and work with our African partners on broader UN reform.

We have also doubled UK aid to Sudan, supporting more than 1 million displaced people. I saw our impact at the Adré crossing and announced a further £20 million to support food production and sexual and reproductive services. The UK is the third largest donor in the crisis, having offered almost £250 million in support this financial year.

We have been redoubling our diplomatic efforts as well. In the spring, I am looking to gather Ministers in the UK to galvanise international support for peace. We need to see three things: first, the RSF and the Sudanese armed forces committing to a permanent ceasefire and the protection of civilians; secondly, unrestricted humanitarian access into and within Sudan and a permanent UN presence; and finally, an international commitment to a sustained and meaningful political process. Instead of new and even more deadly weapons entering the conflict, we want consistent calls for all political parties to unite behind a common vision of a peaceful Sudan. We will engage with all those willing to work to bring the conflict to an end.

On the DRC as well, the UK has reacted quickly to the current crisis. We now advise British nationals not to travel to the Rubavu district in western Rwanda, on the border with Goma. We are continuing our humanitarian assistance, having provided £62 million this financial year. This enables lifesaving assistance such as clean drinking water, treatment for malnourished children and support for victims of sexual violence.

Ultimately, however, we need a political solution. We know that M23 rebels could not have taken Goma without material support from Rwandan defence forces. My noble friend Lord Collins of Highbury and I have

[Mr David Lammy]

been urging all sides to engage in good faith in African-led processes. Lord Collins spoke to the Rwandan and Angolan Foreign Ministers last week, and in the past few days I have spoken to Rwandan President Kagame and South African Foreign Minister Lamola. For all the complexities of such a long-running conflict, we must find a way to stop the killing.

Civilians in Sudan and eastern DRC must feel so powerless. Power seems gripped by those waging war around them. The Government and our partners cannot simply will a ceasefire into being, but that is not a licence for inaction. As with Gaza, it can take hundreds of days of diplomatic failure to reach even the most fragile of ceasefires. So for our part, the UK will keep doing all in our power to focus the world on these conflicts and somehow bring them to an end. I commend this statement to the House.

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

3.26 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of his statement and for the way he has spoken about Sudan and the DRC. Both conflicts are truly shocking, and are resulting in an ongoing displacement crisis, with millions of innocent people having to flee their homes. As he has highlighted in his statement and in his discussions with the African nations and their diplomats, armed conflict in Africa continues to cause immense human suffering and, of course, greater pressure on United Nations peacekeeping. The scale of food insecurity is enormous. The most horrific crimes are being committed against civilians: systematic human rights abuses; sexual violence; torture; and mass civilian casualties.

We are deeply concerned by the intensification of the fighting in eastern DRC and its humanitarian consequences. We continue to urge all parties to deliver on their commitments, which were agreed through the regional peace process. We welcome the mediation efforts facilitated by the Angolan-led Luanda peace process and continue to urge all parties to commit to further political dialogue.

In government, my party was committed to the protection of civilians in and around Goma. The Foreign Secretary will be deeply aware of the long-standing work that took place there, including through the three-year humanitarian programme for the east of DRC, which sought to deliver lifesaving emergency assistance to more than 1.1 million people and to protect and build resilience for the most vulnerable. Despite all of that, it is important that we learn more and understand what the root causes are and how we can bring greater stability and peace to the DRC.

What is happening in Darfur must also not be tolerated. The conflict in Sudan has put pressure on neighbouring countries, which are already under immense strain, and is creating a level of human misery that is totally unconscionable. Our main overreaching objective is clear, and we both agree that we need an immediate ceasefire and an end to all hostilities in Sudan.

The UK Government, working with international partners, must leave no stone unturned as they try to press the warring parties into a ceasefire. The Government

must also do everything within their power to hold those responsible for the atrocities to account, because red lines have been crossed in this conflict and we cannot stand by.

The Foreign Secretary will know that the Conservative Government applied a range of sanctions in the past on those supporting the activities of the Rapid Support Forces and the Sudanese armed forces. As the penholder on Sudan at the United Nations Security Council, will the Foreign Secretary update the House on what actions are likely to follow at the UNSC? The world can and should be doing much more, as the Foreign Secretary has rightly said, so what recent discussions has he had with other countries that could be doing much more to leverage their own influence? That also applies to the neighbouring regions. Will he provide an update on the work of Saudi Arabia and others helping with the important Jeddah process and whether that is on track?

On sanctions, does the Foreign Secretary intend to go further, perhaps following the US's lead? Did he discuss the matter in his call with Secretary Rubio, because Sudan was not in the read-out and was not referenced at all? Will he speak more about the United Nations reform that he has just touched on? The US Administration are also reviewing all their aid programmes, so was that discussed in his call with Secretary Rubio? Beyond sanctions, is he working to identify other hard-hitting ways to put pressure on the leadership of the RSF and the SAF and those supporting those awful war machines?

While the conflict continues to rage, we need a laser-like focus on the humanitarian assistance, and I do not just mean on the type or volume—important, though, that is. If British aid is being sent and is getting through, we must ensure that it gets over the border and is distributed to the people it is intended to help. Will the Foreign Secretary share his latest assessment of the state of the border crossing in Sudan? How much aid is getting through each day and from which crossing points? When the aid gets inside Sudan, are the safeguards there to ensure that it gets to the people who need it, and does he have the mechanisms in place to measure the impact?

On the subject of aid, this might be premature, but will the Foreign Secretary speak about the Government's plans for the future of aid funding given the forthcoming spending review? While this dreadful war persists, what is he doing to increase efforts to collect evidence of the crimes committed so that those responsible can be held accountable and face justice?

The Foreign Secretary has spoken in recent days about the vile people smuggling gangs. He mentioned the matter not just in this statement, but in his previous written statements. Will further comprehensive action be taken to target those miserable, vile and evil criminal gangs? What more will the Government do to put this whole issue to an end and ensure that this destruction and displacement across these two countries comes to an end?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady. Of course, I know that she too draws some heritage from the African continent and so will take these issues very seriously. I also know the work of the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) before coming to office. He did a lot on the humanitarian aid side, particularly in relation to Sudan.

The conflict in Sudan has created, as I said, the world's largest humanitarian crisis. Thirty million people—half of Sudan's population—are now in urgent need. To make it clear to the House, that is more than Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Gaza and Mali combined. That is how bad the situation currently is. That is why I raised this issue with Secretary of State Rubio when I spoke to him yesterday—although, because of all the issues in front of us, it was a brief conversation, we both said we would return to the issue, and we discussed the fact that I am keen to convene a group of nations, including regional partners on this very same issue.

On sanctions, since the 2023 conflict the UK has frozen the assets of nine commercial entities linked to the parties involved in the conflict. We obviously do not talk about what more we might be considering, but of course we keep that under review.

The right hon. Lady rightly asked about UN reform. I am pleased to see that the United States recently made statements—under the last Administration, but I am sure that that is a cross-party position—that Africa should be represented on the UN Security Council. That has been our long-standing view over here.

My assessment of the Adré crossing is real concern that the Government in Sudan are saying that that crossing should be closed on 15 February. We disagree with them; it should remain open. There are real issues about access, and one of the things I am pressing for with international colleagues is that the UN should be represented. Its agencies and bodies should be able to work unfettered in Sudan, and civilians must be protected. Recent events at El Fasher are very worrying indeed, but I hope that with regional partners and those internationally engaged, we can at least come to an agreement that the UN should be present and that civilians should be protected, particularly when they are overwhelmingly women and children.

I did also raise the position in the DRC with Secretary of State Rubio when I spoke to him yesterday—in fact, he raised that issue with me, and his real concerns about it. I was clear with President Kagame on Sunday that Rwanda must act to de-escalate this conflict and return to dialogue. I said that an attack on Goma would provoke a strong response from the international community, and from speaking to other nations, my sense is that that is what Rwanda can expect. Rwanda receives over \$1 billion of global aid every year, including around £32 million of bilateral UK assistance. All of that is under threat when you attack your neighbours, and we in this House are clear that we cannot have countries challenging the territorial integrity of other countries. Just as we will not tolerate it in the continent of Europe, we cannot tolerate it wherever in the world it happens. We have to be clear about that.

The UK has sanctioned M23 and other armed groups through the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018. There are currently 56 individuals and nine entities listed under UN sanctions, and again, we keep that list under review. The shadow Foreign Secretary has rightly talked about the work of the last Government in relation to humanitarian assistance, and I put on record the work that they led on both sides of this horrendous conflict. We are providing £62 million this year for programmes in eastern DRC.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his updates, and for his clear and deeply felt commitment to Sudan. It is the largest humanitarian crisis on record, yet both of the warring parties are choking humanitarian access. The SAF have blocked the UN from reaching areas controlled by the RSF, while the RSF is increasingly imposing bureaucratic obstacles to delay and block aid. What measures is the Foreign Secretary taking to ensure that both of the warring parties and their international backers are allowing vital aid to get in?

Mr Lammy: There have been efforts in the past. The US tried to lead efforts, and all regional partners—the Egyptians and the Chadians—want to see those efforts bear fruit. However, the truth is that the people I met are suffering horrendously. When you are at a crossing meeting those fleeing for their lives, you are always aware that you are often meeting those closest to the border and those with the means to arrange for smugglers to get them out. Despite the millions who have left and are now displaced, tens of millions more are still stuck in Sudan, unable to leave. For all those reasons, we have to be crystal clear about the access issues—not just the fact of aid, but the fact that we want the aid to get through and reach the people who it needs to reach.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement, and thank him for advance sight of it. He is right to say that the crisis in Sudan will go down in history as one of the biggest humanitarian catastrophes of our lifetimes. I welcome the Foreign Secretary's visit to this region and his personal engagement with it, and for updating this House on conflicts in Africa. My party agrees with him that our level of concern for those affected by conflicts overseas should never be influenced by their location.

The Foreign Secretary is also right to draw the House's attention to the escalation of violence by M23 in Goma. M23's pursuit of mineral resources reminds us of the DRC's tragedy of having such riches that trigger such violence. The announcement of increased UK aid to Sudan in November was welcome, as is the further £20 million deployed at the weekend. The Foreign Secretary is right to say that the UK's aid budget not only reduces suffering, but reduces the pressure on refugees to make hazardous journeys in search of sanctuary elsewhere.

Yet the UK's ability to respond to humanitarian and conflict situations is reduced by the Government's failure to commit to the 0.7% target for official development assistance. Will the Foreign Secretary explain to the House why it was reported yesterday that £117 million has been cut from the integrated security fund, which would likely mean less money for conflict reduction work? Can he say what assessment he has made of the impact of the Trump Administration's instruction that all US aid programmes are suspended?

I welcome the Foreign Secretary's plans to convene Foreign Ministers to galvanise international efforts to seek a ceasefire, but can he say by when this meeting will take place and how he plans to leverage the UK's position as the Security Council penholder on Sudan? Can he confirm that the Government will not prematurely

[Calum Miller]

recognise any alleged authority Government in Sudan when the country is so divided, and how does he propose to reduce the interference of external powers, including Russia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates and now China, in the conflict?

Mr Lammy: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman. On what is happening in Rwanda and the DRC, many years ago in this place—22 years—an all-party parliamentary group on the African great lakes region was set up. I was a member of it, and the then MP for Bethnal Green and Bow, Oona King, chaired it for a while. That is when I first went to the region, in the wake of the awful, horrendous ethnic cleansing—[HON. MEMBERS: “Genocide.”]—and genocide we saw in Rwanda back in that period, and that is when I became familiar with the issues.

The hon. Gentleman raises the issue of the 0.7% target on development spend. I understand why those feelings are strongly felt about development, but he knows that we have a £22 billion black hole. We want to get there eventually, but it will take us some time. Notwithstanding that, the UK still makes a major contribution in development aid spending at a time when we are seeing, right across the global community, aid spending falling because of the cost of living crisis, with inflation and the effects that it has on western populations.

It is too early to make an assessment of some of the changes we have read about with the Trump Administration. I am told and advised that there is an 85-day process for the new Administration to look at these issues. However, it was interesting to me that Secretary of State Rubio raised the DRC with me before I raised it with him. We head to the Munich conference in a few weeks’ time, where these issues will of course be discussed, and I hope we will be able to convene and come together on the issue of Sudan shortly thereafter.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary’s statement and the work he is doing to shine a light on the crisis. As he said, this is about not just the amount of aid, but the crucial issue of access. There is, quite clearly, unequal access for the UN in distributing aid in Sudan. Can I ask how we are supporting organisations on the ground in Sudan, particularly Sudanese aid organisations, to deliver aid in the area?

Mr Lammy: I am very grateful for that question, because there is a lively civil society still at work in Sudan and NGOs are on the ground in Sudan doing what they can in the absence of UN agencies able to do that work. I was grateful that the World Food Programme facilitated my trip to the Chad border with Sudan, and to see trucks going in with the World Food Programme name emblazoned on them that may bring some alleviation to the suffering. However, I must say that in my conversations with the drivers, they talked about trucks being hijacked, the changes, the barriers and not being able to get as far as they would like. There are still serious issues on the ground.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his kind remarks.

On Sudan, I commend the Foreign Secretary for going to Chad. I visited the same location last year, and he will have seen the clear and horrific evidence that this is the world’s worst humanitarian crisis. While he was there, did he make it clear to the President of Chad that the use of his private airport by foreign powers to arm and assist the RSF is completely unacceptable?

On the DRC, as the Foreign Secretary rightly says everyone should draw back and engage with the Luanda process. Does he agree that it would help if the Congolese army did not so clearly make common cause with the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda, who perpetrated the genocide to which he referred, and who pose a serious threat to Rwanda’s security and were responsible for the murder of nearly 1 million Tutsis in 1992?

Mr Lammy: My bilateral conversation with the President of Chad was extensive—I was accompanied by the Foreign Minister for most of the 48 hours that I was there—and my concern for the women and children was heartfelt, recognising the huge burden of displaced people that Chad bears as best it can. I underlined the UK’s clear position on the conflict, the action of the parties and the need for regional partners to support a political process to end the bloodshed. On the situation in the DRC, I have spoken to President Kagame. I also spoke to South Africa’s Minister of International Relations and Cooperation following the murder of its peacekeepers, and Lord Collins has spoken to a range of African partners, all of whom have a stake. The Kenyans and the Angolans have been doing a lot to move forward the Luanda process, which I urge Kigali to continue to work on.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Ind): According to UN experts the UAE has been providing arms and support to the Rapid Support Forces through its networks in Libya, Chad, the Central African Republic, South Sudan and Uganda. Those arms and supplies have reportedly been disguised as humanitarian aid, raising serious concerns about the UAE’s role in exacerbating conflict and suffering in Sudan. The UAE is one of the UK’s largest arms buyers, with billions of pounds worth of defence exports licensed in recent years. Given the gravity of those allegations, and the UK’s obligations under international law, will the Government commit to ending all arms sales to the UAE unless it can be unequivocally verified that they are no longer supplying the RSF?

Mr Lammy: I say to the hon. Gentleman that we hold—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Lady—forgive me; I am still suffering from jetlag. We hold regular discussions with all regional partners about the conflict in Sudan, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and African partners, as she would expect. Any sustainable process for peace in Sudan requires the support of all those in the region and beyond.

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): I thank the Foreign Secretary for coming and making this statement. He was right to say that these devastating conflicts in Africa are often overlooked, and I thank him for that as it is something a number of Members have mentioned in the past. Will he review the conflict budgets, as some of the international NGOs are often

there when nobody else is and no other attention is being paid? On Sudan in particular, and Secretary Blinken's remarks around genocide being committed, what implications does that have for UK foreign policy? On the DRC, the Foreign Secretary mentioned the material support from Rwanda, but what action is he taking regarding all those who have facilitated the conflict, and what action and changes in policy will we see from the FCDO?

Mr Lammy: On the first point, let me be clear: we have come in as a new Government and we think there is an important role for conflict mediation, building on the historic role that this country has played, including in Northern Ireland. We have real strengths and we want to work with partners such as Norway, and others, on conflicts—I reassure the hon. Gentleman about that. Of course I recognise that there are broader regional issues. That is why I wanted to convene, and the UK will continue to play its role. That is why we brought the UN resolution with Sierra Leone, and why I have been trying to rally support globally. Frankly, that is why I visited, taking the opportunity of a ceasefire in Gaza to draw attention to this issue and galvanise the world.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's visit to a malnutrition clinic on the border of Chad and Sudan and the additional funding for the region. Sudan has one of the highest rates of malnutrition in the world. He says he has had discussions with regional actors, but can he go further and update us on where those discussions are? What processes are under way? Can he give further detail on his assessment of how aid is currently getting in across the Adré border, especially ready-to-use therapeutic food, which is vital in stopping malnutrition and starvation in children?

Mr Lammy: The experience of visiting, with Médecins Sans Frontières, a small clinic in Chad with malnourished babies, children and their mothers—knowing I was making a ministerial trip, but also not knowing whether these small babies would survive in the days ahead—was heartrending. I thank Médecins Sans Frontières for all it is doing to keep those children alive and to support those mothers. It is why we are not only doubling our aid to Sudan, but increasing our aid to Chad next door, which is bearing the brunt of all those displaced people who have come. My hon. Friend asks how we are continuing to work on this issue with our partners. I chaired a Sudan session with Foreign Ministers during the G7, plus the Arab Quint. We discussed collective action and how the G7 and the Quint could take the warring parties and push for improved humanitarian access, the protection of civilians and increased aid. I will continue to redouble my efforts in that regard.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Foreign Secretary is right to come here to express his dismay and frustration, which we all share, but what assessment has he made of the effectiveness of the United Nations in this? It seems that its mission is failing. Even the measured and balanced resolution that he put together with Sierra Leone failed to get through on 18 November. Would it not be better to look instead at underscoring the importance of an African solution to this? In that respect, what discussions has he had

with the African Union, notwithstanding that it is crucial that currently suspended members are involved in the process?

Mr Lammy: The right hon. Gentleman is right to raise the important role of the United Nations. I am hugely disappointed that Russia continues to block progress in the UN Security Council. Notwithstanding the pressures, I applaud the work of the UN agencies in particular and what they are attempting to do. I remind him of the work of the World Food Programme, the Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs and others. It is important that there is a UN presence in Sudan and that its agencies can work unfettered there. Clearly, the fact that UNESCO has pledged to withdraw in the DRC is a real issue, given what is happening and therefore what could flow from it ending its period in the country, despite the pressures over the last 20 years.

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesend) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement. An article in *The Lancet* this month illustrates an alarming rise in multiple life-threatening infectious diseases, including cholera, dengue fever, malaria, measles and polio, due to the destruction of health and sanitation infrastructures. How is the UK supporting progress in securing humanitarian access to life-saving treatments for these diseases, such as malaria, and does he agree that this support is needed, as these infections have an impact worldwide? If we allow these infections to fester, it will have implications for humanity.

Mr Lammy: I thank my hon. Friend for her work in raising these issues from the Back Benches. There has been a worrying outbreak of dengue fever in particular—I met individuals who suffered as a consequence of that—and malaria is rife. We will do all that we can to support that work, but the aid access issues in Sudan in particular make that extremely difficult. That is why we must have a process that allows for unfettered aid to reach those in Sudan who need it.

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): I join hon. Members in thanking the Foreign Secretary for bringing the statement to the House, given that these matters are so rarely discussed. The United States has often played a key role in ending such conflicts or providing humanitarian support. To support his efforts with Secretary of State Rubio, will he ask for the Prime Minister's support to ensure that the conflict is on President Trump's agenda, given the latter's stated "America first" agenda?

Mr Lammy: I listened to Secretary of State Rubio's first press conference, where he talked about wanting prosperity and, of course, security and safety for the United States. The truth is, the tremendous problems that we are seeing in the horn of Africa, the Sahel and Sudan are deeply worrying not just for us in Europe but for the United States, because failed countries become a haven of jihadist extremist activity that washes back up on our shores; that is the truth of it. When big countries, or indeed more powerful countries, invade small countries—particularly countries with minimal resources—we should be concerned indeed and raise that as a big issue. For all those reasons, I expect that the United States will take a big interest in what is happening.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement and the shadow Foreign Secretary for her response to it. It is important that the House speaks with one voice on these issues. In recent days, I have heard from constituents with family in Sudan, and to say that they are terrified and devastated does not describe it. There is real fear and anguish in the Sudanese diaspora in the United Kingdom.

We have to be seen to be believed, so I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for making his visit to Chad last week and thank him for his leadership on these issues, but I reiterate the point made by the right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison). Will he touch on the specific discussions that he has had in recent weeks with the African Union—it has an important role to play—and whether he plans to go to Addis to make that case in person?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for continuing to raise these issues from the Back Benches and pressing me on them whenever he sees me in the Lobby. Let me be clear—I should have made this point—that we are of course working with the African Union. New leadership is about to take up post in the African Union in the coming weeks, and we will continue to push these issues with it. We will work with a range of partners including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, the United States, African and European countries who are taking an interest, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, the United Nations and the African Union. I reassure him of that.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I also thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement, for Sudan is indeed the forgotten conflict, despite 8 million internally displaced people and 24.5 million people on the verge of famine. I lend my sentiments and honour the three United Nations peacekeepers from Uruguay, South Africa and Malawi, the country of my birth. In the Foreign Secretary's statement, he mentioned more deadly weapons entering the conflict. Who is providing those arms and weapons? What vested interests do they have in Sudan—are they in its natural resources, its gold or its port? What leverage are we using with those countries with whom we have good diplomatic relations who may be supplying those weapons?

Mr Lammy: I met African ambassadors yesterday to discuss those very issues. We talked about the security and resilience of the African continent and of how, after a relatively peaceful period a decade or so ago when most of the discussion was about development, they are now concerned about those who are fighting proxy wars in different ways. That is not to say that regional powers will not have different interests, but when we see the behaviour of mercenaries and we look at the problems of arms sales in Africa and the damage that does to civilian life, we have to hold out for a political solution. We have to get back to dialogue and we have to get back to diplomacy. That is what I am seeking to emphasise in the statement.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I echo the praise for the Foreign Secretary's visit last week. It is important that we continue to keep the spotlight on Sudan. Last week, I was able to visit an exhibition called "Children's drawings", arranged by

Waging Peace and hosted by my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell). It showed a series of pictures painted by young children—powerful images of child survivors of the genocide. One picture showed two army men fighting and an attack by the Janjaweed militia on a hut in a village. Inside the hut, at the bottom of the drawing, a soldier was raping a woman. The 80-page book details the resilience of those survivors, and also the trauma that those young children have gone through.

It is good to see cross-party support in the Chamber on this important issue. The Foreign Secretary is right—where is the outrage and the constant media coverage? There should be no hierarchy of conflicts. Every life is equal. Will the Foreign Secretary commit to the House that he will stand by the victims in Sudan for as long as it takes to get that stability?

Mr Lammy: I thank my hon. Friend for her work to press these issues. I repeat again: where is the liberal outrage? Where are the marches? Where are the emails flooding MPs' inboxes? They are nowhere to be seen. Just a few years ago, the world rallied because of what it saw as horrendous events in Darfur. It is unbelievable that a few years later, the world seems to have forgotten. This is the moment to step up. This House has come together this week to remember those who were massacred in genocide during the Holocaust. These are very serious issues. Just as we have called out horrendous acts against humanity in the past, so we must call this out.

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): As an MP representing a Sudanese community in Bristol and as a member of all-party parliamentary group for Sudan and South Sudan, I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement and his real care and concern for the innocent civilians in Sudan and the DRC, and for speaking about the need to protect them from the horrors taking place. In his statement, he said that irregular migration from Sudan to Britain has increased 16% in the past year—indeed, the Sudanese were among the top nationalities to cross the channel in 2024. Does he agree that a key part of our response, alongside support on the ground, must be to ensure safe and legal routes for Sudanese refugees to come here? Has he raised that with the Home Secretary?

Mr Lammy: Sudan was No. 2 in the list of those coming in December. We are seeing an uptick. That is why we continue to work upstream. I hope to be in Africa to look at more work upstream very shortly. Of course, we work with the UN agencies—we have been in touch with them in the past few days—and those NGOs that work with refugees to discuss these issues.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Ind): The ongoing conflict in Sudan has displaced more than 10 million people, caused widespread famine and fuelling human rights abuses, including sexual violence, with women and girls disproportionately impacted. Will the Foreign Secretary outline the Government's diplomatic efforts to ensure that all parties are held accountable and adhere to international law and human rights standards? He mentioned that the Government do not want new and even more deadly weapons entering the conflict, so will he ensure that this House receives full and up-to-date information about UK export arms

licences with any Government who are alleged to be propping up the RSF or any other military force in this conflict?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for continuing to press these issues. Let me reassure her that the UK continues to pursue all diplomatic avenues to press the parties into a permanent ceasefire, to allow unrestricted humanitarian access to protect civilians and to commit to a sustained, meaningful and peaceful process. We have the most robust export licensing regime in the world. Where there are breaches of international humanitarian law, we suspend licences. She should be reassured that we take that very seriously.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I thank the Foreign Secretary for his statement and agree with his point about the way in which global media values pay no attention whatsoever to conflict or life in Africa. He has drawn attention to that today, and I thank him for it. As one who represents constituents from both the DRC and Sudan, I can say that the communities I represent are emailing and talking, and all of them are saying the same thing: why is nobody discussing what is going on in the DRC or Sudan?

I have two quick questions for the Secretary of State. First, what can he do to reduce the flow of arms into Sudan? It is motivated by the countries that want to get hold of the wealth and natural resources of Sudan, and have no concern whatsoever for the lives of the people in that country. Secondly, having been to Goma on a number of occasions in the past, as well as to other parts of the DRC, I am very well aware of the long-term conflict that has gone on over minerals, essentially, where militias are effectively financed by mineral companies to drag out coltan and other riches from the Congo at the expense of the lives of the people there. The role of the Rwandan Government in supporting M23, and now the occupation of Goma, has to be called out and challenged. Surely, the future has to be one of peace and of the democratic engagement of all the people of the DRC in their future.

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. I know he did a lot of work with my predecessor in Tottenham on issues to do with the African continent. He has been raising these issues consistently for the past three or four decades, and we are very grateful to him for that.

I seek to reassure the right hon. Gentleman that when I say that we want to convene and come together with regional partners and those neighbouring Sudan, as well as with the international partners that take a big interest and play a big role, as the UN penholder, we are of course aware of some of the motivations; there is gold, for example, in Sudan. We urge everyone to step back and get to a ceasefire. This cannot go on forever; there has to be a ceasefire. We need that ceasefire now because of the women and children who are suffering. Like the right hon. Gentleman, I have been to Goma. We have been talking about the coltan in our mobile phones for many years. It is why there are so many external actors engaged in the DRC.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. If questions and answers are short, I can squeeze in just a couple more Members.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary spoke movingly about his visit to the Chad-Sudan border, and I commend him for bearing witness. There is no substitute for doing that.

Since April 2023, there have been more than 500 attacks on healthcare facilities in Sudan, and more than 100 healthcare workers have been killed. The Foreign Secretary will know that attacks on hospitals and healthcare are a growing and grotesque phenomenon across the world. Does he think we could use our position on the UN Security Council as the lead on the protection of civilians to bring together countries and drive forward action to protect healthcare and health facilities across the world?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. We cannot live in a world where the rules are disregarded and where aid and peace workers are murdered as they go about their business. This has been the most horrendous period for the loss of life of good people doing good work. I will take up the call for a renewed effort, using our position on the UN to marshal that.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The horrendous situation in Sudan, as the Foreign Secretary rightly said, calls for a common vision for a peaceful Sudan. Will he outline what detailed talks he has had with other nations outside of Russia and the UN, in order that that vision of a peaceful Sudan can be realised more quickly than would otherwise be the case?

Mr Lammy: Let me reassure the hon. Gentleman that I have spoken to north African countries about this issue. I was in Chad, obviously, but I also raised these issues in Egypt, where I met Sudanese refugees. I talked about the Quint and the G7; we are using all those multilateral mechanisms to raise this issue and galvanise further support. It was deeply worrying that when the UN called for donors last year, it got just 50% of the money that is required.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement. Gender-based violence increased by 300% in the DRC in recent years, with two thirds of it in the three eastern provinces. In Sudan, we have heard of the epidemic of sexual violence in conflict. This year marks 25 years since the agreement of the landmark UN resolution 1325 on women, peace and security, yet across the world we are letting women down. Please can the Foreign Secretary outline, on the broader agenda, how we will make this the year we actually protect women's rights in conflict and ensure that their voices are heard?

Mr Lammy: I am very grateful that that is the subject of the last question. One reason why the world is not paying attention to these crises is that they are in the continent of Africa. The second reason, I fear, is gendered: it is women who are suffering. It is men who are doing the fighting and women who are being left behind. We cannot go backwards. For all those reasons, I urge parliamentarians to secure debates and raise these issues with the colleagues they meet from other parliamentary democracies, so we get attention back on these women and children in both conflicts and across so many others, who are suffering horrendously.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the Foreign Secretary. We got through quite a lot of questions.

Points of Order

4.11 pm

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your advice. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill is making its way through the House of Commons—indeed, we are well into the Committee stage—yet still we do not have an impact assessment to show what effect it will have. That impedes the ability of Members to properly scrutinise the Bill. Therefore, I seek your advice on what more we can do to force the Government to publish the impact assessment.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for giving notice of her point of order. The Government's own "Guide to Making Legislation" makes it clear that a final impact assessment must be made available alongside Bills introduced to Parliament. I do not know why that has not happened in this case, but clearly it is unsatisfactory that the impact assessment is not available to the Public Bill Committee. I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have noted her remarks.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. You will be aware that there has been major disruption in Northern Ireland and, indeed, in parts of Scotland due to last week's storms. Hundreds of thousands of homes, businesses and families were left without electricity, and some without water. Tens of thousands are still in the same position five days later. I know the matter was raised yesterday in the House, but in rural areas, along with major disruption, they have no online facilities, meaning no business can be done, including last-minute tax returns to His Majesty's Revenue and Customs. Has the Prime Minister, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland or the Secretary of State for Scotland indicated that they will come to the House to spell out what additional steps they are proposing to help us bring this crisis to a speedy but overdue end?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order. I have had no indication that any Minister is coming to the House to make a statement today, but he will recall that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster made a

statement to the House yesterday, in which he described the measures the UK Government were taking in Scotland and Northern Ireland to address the impact of the storm.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On 8 January, in response to a question on child protection, the Prime Minister told this House:

"Reasonable people can agree or disagree on whether a further inquiry is necessary."—[*Official Report*, 8 January 2025; Vol. 759, c. 836.]

Yet over the past week, the hon. Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers), the shadow Policing Minister, has used social media to link councillors who voted against a new national inquiry with grooming gangs. In accordance with the customs of this House, I have informed the hon. Member for Stockton West that I intended to name him.

Madam Deputy Speaker, those posts have incited vile comments online, including councillors being accused of being paedophiles. One comment chillingly read:

"I hope people find out where they live and start persecuting them."

We know too well that such words online can lead to real-world consequences. One councillor was specifically targeted through paid social media advertisements. People turned up at her home and terrorised her, with yobs braying at her door. Other councillors have been verbally assaulted.

Members of this House have benefited from the good offices of Mr Speaker, who has championed their safety and security. I am sure, Madam Deputy Speaker, that all are appalled by the depraved behaviour of child grooming and rape gangs, but to exploit that suffering for political gain is, frankly, sickening. I would be grateful if you could advise me on the most appropriate way to highlight the potential consequences of our words to all Members, in particular the shadow Policing Minister—if, indeed, he is considered fit to continue in that role.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order, and I note that he informed the hon. Member for Stockton West that he intended to refer to him in the Chamber. The Chair is not responsible for comments made by Members on social media, but I urge all Members to reflect carefully on the likely impact of what they post online.

Women's State Pension Age (Ombudsman Report and Compensation Scheme)

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

4.15 pm

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the Secretary of State to publish measures to address the findings of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman in its report entitled "Women's State Pension age: our findings on injustice and associated issues"; to require the Secretary of State to publish proposals for a compensation scheme for women born between 6 April 1950 and 5 April 1960 inclusive who have been affected by increases in the state pension age; and for connected purposes.

I do so with no joy whatsoever—indeed, my reason for doing so is born more out of complete and utter frustration—but because it is the right thing to do for a number of reasons. It is the right thing to do because we require trust in politics, and I think that all of us at this moment in time, certainly in this Chamber, are conscious of the breakdown in trust between ourselves in this Parliament and the public outside.

For those of us who have stood alongside the WASPI women for many years, for those of us who have pledged to support the WASPI women for many years, for those of us who promised to take action if we were ever to gain Government office, it is important that that trust is repaid, and my Bill seeks to do that. It seeks to do the right thing by those to whom we made a promise.

This is also the right thing to do because, for many of the women who are impacted, this injustice is not alone. Throughout their lives, many will unfortunately have been impacted by the fact that they did not receive a salary comparable to that of their male counterparts. These are women who will have faced the injustice of knowing that they were not able to get themselves up the career ladder simply because they were women and there was a male counterpart. They are the people who will have known that whether or not they were going to have children might well decide what their career opportunities were. It was an unforgivable injustice that they had to experience, and we should not be compounding that injustice by not giving them the compensation they deserve for having their pension entitlement changed.

This is also the right thing to do because the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman tells us it that is the right thing to do. If we do not have trust and confidence in the estate in which we operate, and if we do not support the outcomes of our ombudsman, I must simply ask: where are the public to go? Where are they to place their trust? The ombudsman made it abundantly clear that these women were the victims of maladministration, and that the Department for Work and Pensions had not acted in the way that it should have done. Much worse than that, however, the ombudsman was clear that the DWP could not be trusted to rectify the wrong that it had imposed on those women. So what happened? We were effectively delegated the responsibility to respond, and what did we see? We saw a Government turn their back on those women, but not before, of course, they had held placards; not before, of course, they had given warm words when they had felt that it was politically expedient to do so.

Let us listen to some of those warm words. Let us start off with the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, who said:

"All your working life you've got in mind the date on which you can retire and get your pension, and just as you get towards it, the goalposts are moved and you don't get it, and it's a real injustice."

Let us look at what the Deputy Prime Minister said:

"They want their money back, and quite rightly so."

Let us look at what the Chancellor of the Exchequer said:

"Pleasure to speak in the state pension age debate and talk about women who are being treated so badly. Govt please listen. #WASPI".

The Home Secretary said:

"I want to keep fighting for a fair deal for the WASPI women."

The Business Secretary said:

"I have always supported local campaigners and will continue to stand up for the WASPI women of Tameside. I know you will fight on."

The Defence Secretary said:

"Labour will correct this historic wrong."

For those of us in Scotland, let us look north of the border. The leader of the Labour party in Scotland, Anas Sarwar, said:

"Under my leadership, WASPI women will finally receive the justice they deserve."

The wider Labour party in Scotland stated:

"Labour will right the historical wrong of pension discrimination by compensating more than 300,000 women in Scotland with an average of £15,000. When Labour wins, Scotland's women win."

What happened? A parcel of rogues, indeed.

I was one of many who were in this Chamber prior to Christmas when the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions decided to make a statement right before Parliament broke off to confirm that the Government were sorry for the maladministration that took place, that they were going to make sure the Department for Work and Pensions, which inflicted this wrong upon those women, would never do so again and that lessons would be learned—but that was your lot. The evidence they used to back up their decision not to award any compensation—in fact, not even to discuss the concept of compensation in this Chamber—was based upon the data, as I understand it, of just 200 respondents from many years ago.

The Government then went on to say that there is no money at all, as if they are not the ones who get to decide how money is spent; as if they are not the ones who have decided to box themselves in on pretty much every tax lever that exists; as if—I appreciate that not everyone in the Chamber will agree with me on this point—they are not the ones who have decided to simply accept the broken economic norms formed by leaving the European Union and rejecting access to the single market and the customs union, and to accept that it will cause economic damage and limit the money is available to them. None of that was their fault at all. How very dare they? Do they think the public are zipped up the back? Do they think the WASPI women are not listening and watching the decisions they have chosen to take?

This is a defining issue. Many of us in the last Parliament watched on as a TV show changed the mind of the Government in respect of the Post Office Horizon scandal. Many of us watched on as Parliament forced the Government to change tack on the infected blood

[Stephen Flynn]

scandal. Many of us have spoken about the Equitable Life scandal, the Hillsborough disaster, the loan charge debacle and, indeed, the WASPI campaign. Defining issues of the last Parliament can still be defining issues of this Parliament, but only if the Government act to provide the compensation and redress that these women so badly deserve.

There was a man who went on to become the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, who said:

“The walls of Westminster are so high.”

He was inferring that we do not listen to what the public want, nor do we see what they are fighting for and what they believe in. But we know where the public stand on this issue. We know that they believe the WASPI women should be given the compensation that they deserve, and with this Bill we will seek to provide it.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 105, Noes 0.

Division No. 92]

[4.25 pm

AYES

| | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Adam, Shockat | Darling, Steve |
| Allister, Jim | Davey, rh Ed |
| Amos, Gideon | Davies, Ann |
| Anderson, Lee | Denyer, Carla |
| Aquarone, Steff | Dillon, Mr Lee |
| Babarinde, Josh | Doogan, Dave |
| Begum, Apsana | Duffield, Rosie |
| Bennett, Alison | Duncan-Jordan, Neil |
| Berry, Siân | Easton, Alex |
| Brash, Mr Jonathan | Farage, Nigel |
| Brewer, Alex | Farron, Tim |
| Brown-Fuller, Jess | Flynn, rh Stephen |
| Buckley, Julia | Foord, Richard |
| Campbell, Mr Gregory | Forster, Mr Will |
| Cane, Charlotte | Franklin, Zöe |
| Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair | Gale, rh Sir Roger |
| Chadwick, David | George, Andrew |
| Chambers, Dr Danny | Gethins, Stephen |
| Coghlan, Chris | Gibson, Sarah (<i>Proxy vote</i> |
| Collins, Victoria | <i>cast by Anna Sabine)</i> |
| Cooper, Daisy | Gilmour, Rachel |
| Corbyn, rh Jeremy | Glover, Olly |
| Dance, Adam | Goldman, Marie |

Gordon, Tom
Green, Sarah
Harding, Monica
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heylings, Pippa
Hinchliff, Chris
Hobhouse, Wera
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Liz
Jermey, Terry
Jones, Clive
Khan, Ayoub
Kohler, Mr Paul
Law, Chris
Leadbitter, Graham
Leishman, Brian
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lockhart, Carla
Logan, Seamus
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Helen
Mathew, Brian
McMurdock, James
Medi, Llinos
van Mierlo, Freddie
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Mohamed, Iqbal
Moran, Layla
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen

Morrison, Mr Tom (*Proxy vote*
cast by Mr Forster)
Munt, Tessa
Murray, Susan
Olney, Sarah
Onn, Melanie
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Ramsay, Adrian
Robinson, rh Gavin
Roome, Ian
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shannon, Jim
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Sollom, Ian
Sultana, Zarah
Swann, Robin
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Cameron
Trickett, Jon
Voaden, Caroline
Wilkinson, Max
Wilson, Munira
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wishart, Pete
Witherden, Steve
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:
Kirsty Blackman and
Bobby Dean

NOES

Tellers for the Noes:

Brendan O'Hara and
Ben Lake

Question accordingly agreed to.

Ordered,

That Stephen Flynn, Kirsty Blackman, Pete Wishart, Graham Leadbitter, Liz Saville Roberts, Brian Leishman, Sir Julian Lewis, Steve Darling, Siân Berry, Gavin Robinson, Claire Hanna and Jeremy Corbyn present the Bill.

Stephen Flynn accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 7 March, and to be printed (Bill 169).

Water(Special Measures)Bill[Lords]

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

[Relevant documents: oral evidence taken before the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on 21 January 2025, on Reforming the water sector, HC 588; oral evidence taken before the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee on 26 November 2024, on Work of the Department and its arm's-length bodies, HC 415.]

New Clause 18

SPECIAL PROVISION IN CHARGES SCHEMES

“(1) The Water Industry Act 1991 is amended as set out in subsections (2) and (3).

(2) In section 143A(3)(b), after ‘regulations’ insert ‘or, in the case of regulations made by the Secretary of State (rather than the Welsh Ministers), by which that entitlement is otherwise to be established’.

(3) After section 143A insert—

‘143AA Special provision under section 143A: financial arrangements

- (1) Subsection (2) applies if regulations under section 143A impose on relevant undertakers whose areas are wholly or mainly in England requirements of the sort described in subsection (2)(d) of that section.
- (2) The Secretary of State may by regulations establish a scheme for the purpose of distributing among the relevant undertakers that are subject to the requirements all or part of the costs incurred by them in complying with the requirements (with the distribution to be on such basis as is provided for in the regulations).
- (3) The scheme may operate by way of—
 - (a) direct payments between relevant undertakers, or
 - (b) payments into and out of a fund established and maintained under the regulations.
- (4) Subsections (5) and (6) apply if a scheme is established under subsection (2).
- (5) If the Secretary of State or the Authority makes price control provision, they must design the provision with a view to not preventing the passing-on of costs as described in subsection (7).
- (6) The Secretary of State may by regulations—
 - (a) make provision about how the Authority is to comply with subsection (5);
 - (b) modify the effect of any price control provision made by the Authority with a view to enabling the passing-on of costs as described in subsection (7).
- (7) The passing-on of costs occurs when a relevant undertaker is able to recoup its relevant net costs by charging additional amounts under section 142(1).
- (8) An undertaker's relevant net costs are the total of its costs incurred in—
 - (a) complying with the requirements referred to in subsection (1), and
 - (b) complying with the requirements of the scheme, less any payments it receives under the scheme.
- (9) In this section, “price control provision” means provision made by or under—
 - (a) regulations under section 143A,
 - (b) rules under section 143B, or
 - (c) a condition of a relevant undertaker's appointment under Chapter 1 of Part 2,

that restricts the amount that may be charged by a relevant undertaker under section 142(1).

- (10) Where a determination within section 12(3) (determination by CMA provided for by undertaker's appointment) involves the making of price control provision, subsections (5) and (6) apply in relation to the CMA as they apply in relation to the Authority.

143AB Special provision under section 143A: consultation

- (1) This section applies to—
 - (a) regulations under section 143A that, in relation to relevant undertakers whose areas are wholly or mainly in England, make provision of the sort described in subsection (2)(d) of that section, and
 - (b) regulations under section 143AA.
- (2) Before making regulations to which this section applies, the Secretary of State must (subject to subsection (3)) consult—
 - (a) the Authority,
 - (b) the relevant undertakers to which the regulations would apply, and
 - (c) such other persons as the Secretary of State considers appropriate.
- (3) But the Secretary of State does not have to consult if—
 - (a) the regulations only amend earlier regulations, and
 - (b) the Secretary of State considers that the amendments are sufficiently minor that consultation is unnecessary.”
- (4) The Digital Economy Act 2017 is amended as set out in subsections (5) and (6).
- (5) In section 38 (disclosure of information to water and sewerage undertakers)—
 - (a) in subsection (2), for “people living in water poverty” substitute “eligible people”;
 - (b) after subsection (9) insert—

“(9A) A person is “eligible” for the purposes of this section and section 39—

 - (a) if the person is living in water poverty, or
 - (b) in the application of the sections to a water or sewerage undertaker for an area which is wholly or mainly in England, if the person is among those for whom special provision is required to be made by regulations within subsection (3)(a).”
- (6) In section 39 (disclosure of information by water and sewerage undertakers), in subsection (2), for “people living in water poverty” substitute “eligible people (see section 38(9A)).” — (*Emma Hardy.*)

This new clause supplements existing powers to provide for special charging arrangements for customers in need. It enables automatic enrolment, cost-sharing among water companies (and their customers), and broader information-sharing between public authorities and water companies; and imposes a requirement for consultation.

Brought up, and read the First time.

4.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

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

New clause 1—Water Restoration Fund—

“(1) No more than 60 days after the day on which this Act is passed, the Secretary of State must by regulations make provision for the establishment, operation and management of a Water Restoration Fund.

- (2) A Water Restoration Fund is a fund—
 - (a) into which any monetary penalties imposed for specified offences must be paid, and
 - (b) out of which payments must be made for expenditure on measures to improve the quality of the freshwater environment in England.
- (3) The Secretary of State must by regulations list the specified offences for the purpose of this section, which must include—
 - (a) any relevant provisions of the Water Resources Act 1991, including—

- (i) section 24(4) (unlicensed abstraction or related works or contravening abstraction licence); 22 Water (Special Measures) Bill [HL];
- (ii) section 25(2) (unlicensed impounding works or contravening impounding licence);
- (iii) section 25C(1) (contravening abstraction or impounding enforcement notice);
- (iv) section 80 (contravening drought order or permit);
- (v) section 201(3) (contravening water resources information notice);
- (b) regulations under section 2 of the Pollution Prevention and Control Act 1999 (regulation of polluting activities etc);
- (c) regulations under section 61 of the Water Act 2014 (regulation of water resources etc).

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

(5) The Secretary of State may by regulations made by statutory instrument add to the list of offences specified in subsection (3).

(6) The provisions in this section replace any existing provision for the sums received for specified offences, including in section 22A(9) of the Water Industry Act 1991 (penalties)."

This new clause would require all funds from fines on water companies for environmental offences to be ringfenced for the Water Restoration Fund, for spending on freshwater recovery.

New clause 2—Abolition of the Water Services Regulation Authority—

"(1) The Water Industry Act 1991 is amended as follows.

(2) For section 1A (Water Services Regulation Authority) substitute the following—

'1A Abolition of the Water Services Regulation Authority

- (1) The body corporate known as the Water Services Regulation Authority (in this Act referred to as "the Authority") is abolished.
- (2) All references to the duties and functions of the Authority in this Act or any other enactment are null and void.'

(3) Omit Schedule 1A (The Water Services Regulation Authority)."

This new clause abolishes Ofwat.

New clause 3—Impact of the Act on the Environment Agency—

"The Secretary of State must, within 12 months of the passing of this Act—

- (a) review the impact of this Act on the Environment Agency;
- (b) consider whether the Environment Agency requires any additional resources to meet the additional requirements placed upon it by this Act."

New clause 4—Duty to publish maps of sewage catchment networks—

"After section 205 of the Water Industry Act 1991 insert—

'205ZA Duty to publish maps of sewage catchment networks

- (1) Each relevant undertaker must publish a map of its sewage catchment network.
- (2) A map published under this section must illustrate any relevant pumping stations, pipes, and other works constituting part of the undertaker's sewerage network.
- (3) Maps published under this section must be published within 12 months of the passing of this Act, and must be updated whenever changes are made to the sewage catchment network or the components listed in subsection (2).
- (4) Maps published under this section must be made publicly accessible on the undertaker's website."

New clause 5—Duty to prevent chemical pollutants entering the water environment—

"After section 68 of the Water Industry Act 1991 (Duties of water undertakers and water supply licensees with respect to water quality), insert—

'68A Duty to prevent chemical pollutants entering the water environment

- (1) It shall be the duty of a water undertaker to take such steps as are necessary to reduce and prevent chemical pollutants, including but not limited to poly- and perfluorinated alkyl substances, entering the water environment.
- (2) In fulfilling its duty under subsection (1), a relevant undertaker must publish a strategy outlining how it intends to reduce and prevent chemical pollutants entering the water environment.
- (3) In developing a strategy under subsection (2), a relevant undertaker must consult with appropriate agencies, including but not limited to—
 - (a) the relevant Government department;
 - (b) the Authority;
 - (c) the Environment Agency; and
 - (d) the Drinking Water Inspectorate.
- (4) A strategy under subsection (2) must include consideration of how the costs of reducing and preventing chemical pollutants entering the water environment are to be borne or recovered, where such consideration must prevent such cost recovery from resulting in additional charges being made upon consumers."

New clause 6—Licence conditions about nature recovery—

"In the Water Industry Act 1991, after section 17FB insert—

'17FC Nature recovery

- (1) reducing flood risk and pollution incidents, improving water quality and benefiting nature restoration in their catchment area.
- (2) The Authority must not take any action that discourages or prevents a relevant undertaker from making an investment in accordance with subsection (1)."

This new clause would make it a condition of all water companies' licences to consider nature-based solutions to flood risk, improving water quality and benefiting nature restoration in their catchment area, and prevent the regulator from discouraging or stopping such investments.

New clause 7—Review of price review process—

"In section 2 of the Water Industry Act 1991, after subsection (2B) insert—

- (2BA) In furthering its objectives and purposes under subsection (2A), the Authority must, within 12 months of the passing of the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, review its practices as to reviewing price limits.
- (2BB) A review under subsection (2BA) must consider—
 - (a) whether the current practice of price reviews every five years should be replaced with an annual, or otherwise more frequent, system;
 - (b) how changes to inflation and other financial or economic changes could or should be reflected in prices charged by water companies;
 - (c) how any future system of price reviews could better support undertakers in planning and delivering investments beyond a single asset management plan period."

New clause 8—Prohibition on bail-out of water company shareholders and creditors—

"(1) The Secretary of State and His Majesty's Treasury must not directly or indirectly discharge, assume, or guarantee any debts of legal entities in any water company group subject to proceedings under section 24 of the Water Industry Act 1991 (special administration orders made on special petitions), except in accordance with subsection (2).

(2) The special administrator of a water company may reduce the debts owed by the regulated entity to its creditors by up to 100 per cent, taking into account the future forecast expenditure over the short, medium and long term and subject to the administrator's confidence in the company's ability to accommodate this spending.

(3) The prohibition set out in subsection (1) and the reduction of debts set out in subsection (2) must not include pension, wage and other obligations owed to employees, excluding any past or current member of a board of directors, within the water company group."

This new clause aims to allow up to 100% of debts to be cancelled in the event of special administration proceedings, taking into account the scale of investment required to hit the future targets established by the Authority.

New clause 9—Ofwat to publish guidance on debt levels after administration—

"In section 2 of the Water Industry Act 1991, after subsection (2D) insert—

'(2DZA) For the purposes of ensuring that relevant undertakers are able to finance the proper carrying out of their functions under subsection (2A)(c), the Authority must establish guidelines to be followed by relevant undertakers who have been in special administration.

(2DZB) Guidelines produced under subsection (2DZA) must—

- (a) set out a maximum level of debt which can be accrued by the undertaker;
- (b) set out a process for agreeing capital expenditure necessary for service improvements, bill increases, and changes to operating costs while the undertaker is subject to the Special Administration Regime;
- (c) state the penalties which will be imposed for breaches of such guidelines, which may include—
 - (i) financial penalties;
 - (ii) prohibitions on the payment of dividends or other bonuses; or
 - (iii) such other special measures as the Authority deems appropriate."

New clause 11—Duty on sewerage undertakers to monitor overflows at sewage treatment works, pumping stations and on the sewer network—

"(1) The Water Industry Act 1991 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 94—

(a) after subsection (1)(b) insert—

'(c) to make provision for the accurate collection of data relating to its performance in fulfilling its duties under paragraphs (a) and (b).'

(b) after subsection (2) insert—

'(2A) In performing its duties under subsection (1)(c), a sewerage undertaker must—

- (a) install volume flow meters in all locations where sewage overflows occur, including sewage treatment works, pumping stations and on the sewer network for which it is responsible;
- (b) establish appropriate required capacities for each sewage treatment works and pumping station;
- (c) publish information on the data and calculations used to establish such required capacities; and
- (d) install all required monitoring tools within 12 months of the passing of this Act."

New clause 12—Rules about performance-related pay—

"(1) The Water Industry Act 1991 is amended as follows.

(2) After section 35D (inserted by section 1 of this Act) insert—

'35E Rules about performance-related pay

- (1) The Authority must issue rules prohibiting a relevant undertaker from giving to persons holding senior roles performance-related pay in respect of any financial year in which the undertaker has failed to prevent all sewage discharges, spills, or leaks.

(2) The rules issued under subsection (1) must include—

- (a) provision designed to secure that performance-related pay which, if given by a relevant undertaker, would contravene the pay prohibition on the part of the undertaker, is not given by another person;
- (b) that any provision of an agreement (whether made before or after the issuing of the rules) is void to the extent that it contravenes the pay prohibition;
- (c) provision for a relevant undertaker to recover any payment made, or other property transferred, in breach of the pay prohibition.

(3) For the purposes of subsection (1)—

- (a) "performance-related pay" means any payment, consideration or other benefit (including pension benefit) the giving of which results from the meeting of any targets or performance standards on the part of the relevant undertaker or the person to whom such payment, consideration or benefit is given;
- (b) a person holds a "senior role" with a relevant undertaker if the person—
 - (i) is a chief executive of the undertaker,
 - (ii) is a director of the undertaker, or
 - (iii) holds such other description of role with the undertaker as may be specified."

This new clause creates a new section in the Water Industry Act 1991 to require Ofwat to ban bonuses for water company bosses if they fail to prevent sewage discharges, spills, or leaks.

New clause 13—Rules about competitive procurement in water infrastructure—

"(1) The Water Industry Act 1991 is amended as follows.

(2) After section 35A insert—

'Rules about competitive procurement in water infrastructure

- (1) The Authority must issue rules requiring relevant undertakers to use competitive procurement processes in respect of procurement relating to water infrastructure.
- (2) If the Authority considers that a relevant undertaker is contravening the rules, the Authority may give the undertaker a direction to do, or not to do, a particular thing specified in the direction.
- (3) It is the duty of a relevant undertaker to comply with a direction given under subsection (2), and this duty is enforceable by the Authority under section 18.
- (4) Rules under this section may—
 - (a) make different provision for different relevant undertakers or descriptions of undertakers;
 - (b) make different provision for different purposes;
 - (c) make provision subject to exceptions.
- (3) The Authority may from time to time—
 - (a) revise rules issued under this section, and
 - (b) issue the revised rules."

New clause 14—Ofwat consideration of pollution targets for price reviews—

"(1) The Water Industry Act 2011 is amended as follows.

(2) After section 17I insert—

"17IA Duty to have regard to pollution targets in carrying out price reviews

When carrying out a periodic review for the purpose of setting a Price Control in respect of one or more relevant undertakers, the Authority must have regard to the performance of the relevant undertaker or undertakers against pollution targets across the previous five years."

New clause 15—Database of performance of sewerage undertakers—

"(1) The Water Industry Act 1991 is amended as follows.

(2) In Chapter 3 of Part II (Protection of customers etc), after section 27ZA (Power to require information for purpose of monitoring) insert—

‘27ZB Duty to establish database

- (1) It shall be the duty of the Authority to establish and maintain a database containing information relating to the performance of sewerage undertakers.
- (2) The database must—
 - (a) be publicly and freely accessible;
 - (b) enable uploaded information to be updated in live-time;
 - (c) contain such data or information as the Authority thinks is necessary for the purposes of public transparency as to the performance of sewerage undertakers; and
 - (d) contain—
 - (i) current and historic data; and
 - (ii) data and information which has been independently collected or analysed including—
 - (a) the start time, end time and duration of all sewage spill events,
 - (b) flow data from flow monitors,
 - (c) the location of each flow meter from which flow data is provided.
 - (3) The Authority may make rules about the provision of data and information under this section.
 - (4) Rules under subsection (3) must include rules relating to information provided about the location of flow meters.
 - (5) The Authority may impose penalties on undertakers who fail to provide such information as is required by this section.”

New clause 16—Establishment of Water Restoration Fund—

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within 60 days of the passing of this Act, make provision for the establishment, operation and management of a Water Restoration Fund.

- (2) A Water Restoration Fund is a fund—
 - (a) into which any monetary penalties imposed on water companies for specified offences must be paid, and
 - (b) out of which payments must be made for expenditure on measures—
 - (i) to help water bodies, including chalk streams, achieve good ecological status, and improve ecological potential and chemical status;
 - (ii) to prevent further deterioration of the ecological status, ecological potential or chemical status of water bodies, including chalk streams;
 - (iii) to enable water-dependent habitats to return to, or remain at, favourable condition;
 - (iv) to restore other water-dependent habitats and species, especially where action supports restoration of associated protected sites or water bodies.

(3) The Secretary of State must, by regulations, list the specified offences for the purposes of this section, which must include—

- (a) any relevant provisions of the Water Resources Act 1991, including—
 - (i) section 24(4) (unlicensed abstraction or related works or contravening abstraction licence);
 - (ii) section 25(2) (unlicensed impounding works or contravening impounding licence);
 - (iii) section 25C(1) (contravening abstraction or impounding enforcement notice);
 - (iv) section 80 (contravening drought order or permit);
 - (v) section 201(3) (contravening water resources information notice);
- (b) any relevant regulations under section 2 of the Pollution Prevention and Control Act 1999 (regulation of polluting activities etc) related to water pollution;
- (c) regulations under section 61 of the Water Act 2014 (regulation of water resources etc).

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

(5) The provisions in this section replace any existing provision for the sums received for specified offences, including in section 22A(9) of the Water Industry Act 1991 (penalties).”

New clause 17—Rules about borrowing—

“After section 154B of the Water Industry Act 1991 (financial assistance for major works) insert—

*‘Chapter III**Rules about borrowing for undertakers**154C Restrictions on undertakers relating to borrowing*

- (1) The Secretary of State may by regulations made by statutory instrument implement a limit on borrowing by a relevant undertaker.
- (2) Where a relevant undertaker has total borrowing exceeding the limit set by regulations made under subsection (1), the relevant undertaker may not make a payment of dividends, capital, assets, or interest to shareholders or controlling entities.
- (3) A statutory instrument containing regulations under this section may not be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before and approved by a resolution of each House of Parliament.”

This new clause would enable limits to be placed on the amount of money that can be borrowed by a water or sewerage undertaker, and prevent an undertaker who has exceeded such limits from being able to pay dividends to shareholders.

New clause 19—Civil penalties: equivalent reduction to customer bills—

“(1) The Secretary of State must make provision for any monetary penalties imposed on a water company to result in equivalent reductions to the amounts charged to customers by the relevant water company.

(2) In fulfilling its duties under subsection (1), the Secretary of State must arrange, annually—

- (a) for the total amount of monetary penalties imposed on a water company in the previous year to be calculated;
- (b) for that total to be divided by the number of customers of the water company;
- (c) for each customer’s next bill from the water company to be reduced by that figure.

(3) Any reduction applied under this section must be indicated on a customer’s statement of account.

(4) In this section, ‘water company’ has the meaning given by section 6(5).”

This new clause would provide for any fines imposed on water companies to result in equivalent reductions to customers’ bills.

New clause 20—Principles of best regulatory practice—

“In section 2 of the Water Industry Act 1991, after subsection (4) insert —

- (4A) For the purposes of having regard to the principles of best regulatory practice, the Authority shall not employ any individual who has been employed by a relevant undertaker in the preceding three years.”

New clause 21—Environmental duties with respect to protected landscapes—

“After section 4 of the Water Industry Act 1991 insert—

‘4A Environmental duties with respect to protected landscapes

- (1) Where a relevant undertaker operates, or has any effect, on land within protected landscapes, that undertaker must—
 - (a) Secure and maintain “high ecological status” in the water in these areas by 2028;
 - (b) further the conservation and enhancement of wildlife and natural beauty;

- (c) improve every storm overflow that discharges within these areas by 2028;
- (d) reduce the load of total phosphorus discharged into freshwaters within these areas from relevant discharges by 2028 to at least 90% lower than the baseline as defined in Regulation 13(1) of the Waste Water Targets set under the Environment Targets (Water) (England) Regulations 2023.
- (2) A relevant undertaker must be put into special administration, and not be eligible for a further licence, if it fails to—
 - (a) demonstrate adequate progress each year;
 - (b) meet the targets in subsection (1).
- (3) Within one year of the day on which the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025 is passed, the Secretary of State must lay a report on the undertakers' implementation of the environmental duties in subsections (1) and (2) before Parliament.
- (4) Following the first report being published under subsection (3), a progress report on implementation must be included in the annual environment improvement plan, issued under section 8 of the Environment Act 2021.
- (5) The Secretary of State must by regulations make provision requiring an undertaker to achieve bespoke objectives for specific iconic and the most culturally and ecologically significant waterways, including, where appropriate, complete removal of sewage discharge from the undertaker's infrastructure.
- (6) A statutory instrument containing regulations under this section may not be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before and approved by a resolution of each House of Parliament.
- (7) In this section—
 - “protected landscapes” includes national parks, national landscapes and national trails;
 - “land” includes rivers, lakes, streams, estuarine and other waterways;
 - “High Ecological Status” means the classification of water bodies defined in Regulation 6 of The Water Environment (Water Framework Directive) (England and Wales) Regulations 2017.”

New clause 22—Consultation on public ownership of water companies—

“(1) The Secretary of State must within three months of this Act coming into force, publish a public consultation on making provision for the transfer of ownership of undertakers to public ownership.

(2) The consultation must consider—

- (a) the process of transferring private water companies to public ownership;
- (b) the circumstances in which water companies will be transferred to public ownership;
- (c) the establishment of new public bodies to manage water services;
- (d) transition arrangements for employees, contracts, and ongoing operations;
- (e) governance structures for publicly-owned water services, including provisions for local democratic control and accountability.

(3) The Secretary of State must, within twelve months of the passing of this Act, lay before both Houses of Parliament a report on this consultation.”

New clause 23—Special administration for breach of environmental and other obligations—

“(1) Section 24 of the Water Industry Act 1991 (special administration orders made on special petitions) is amended as follows.

(2) After subsection (2)(a), insert—

- ‘(aa) that there have been failures resulting in enforcement action from the Authority or the Environment Agency on three or more occasions to—
 - (i) maintain efficient and economical water supply,
 - (ii) improve mains for the flow of clean water,
 - (iii) provide sewerage systems that are effectually drained,
 - (iv) comply with the terms of its licence, or
 - (v) abide by anti-pollution duties in the Environmental Protection Act 1990, Water Resources Act 1991, or the Environmental Permitting (England and Wales) Regulations 2016 (SI 2016/1154);’

(3) After subsection (2), insert—

- ‘(2A) In support of an application made by virtue of subsection (1)(a) in relation to subsection (2)(aa), the Secretary of State must compile and present to the High Court records of—
 - (a) water pipe leaks
 - (b) sewage spilled into waterways, bathing waters, and private properties, and
 - (c) falling below international standards of effective water management.”’

This new clause aims to require the Secretary of State to place a water company into special administration arrangements if they breach certain environmental or other conditions.

New clause 24—Special administration: criminal convictions—

“After subsection (2)(e) of section 24 of the Water Industry Act 1991 insert—

- ‘(f) that has been the recipient of two or more criminal convictions in the last five years.”’

This new clause aims to exert pressure on companies to operate within the law by preventing water companies with numerous criminal convictions from remaining in business.

New clause 25—Companies to be placed in special measures for missing pollution targets—

“In section 2 of the Water Industry Act 1991, after subsection (2D) insert—

- ‘(2DZA) For the purposes of ensuring that the functions of water and sewerage undertakers are properly carried out, the Authority must establish—

- (a) annual, and
- (b) rolling five-year average pollution targets which must be met by water and sewerage undertakers, and the penalties to be imposed for failure to meet such targets.

(2DZB) The performance of a water or sewerage undertaker against such targets must be measured through indirect analysis of monitoring data.

(2DZC) A timetable produced under subsection (2DZA)(b) must require the following reductions in the duration of sewage spill events, using the annual total hours’ duration of all sewage spill events recorded by Event Duration Monitors, based on an average from the last five years, as a baseline—

- (a) a 25% reduction within five years;
- (b) a 60% reduction within ten years;
- (c) an 85% reduction within fifteen years; and
- (d) a 99% reduction within twenty years.

(2DZD) A water or sewerage undertaker which fails to meet pollution targets set out by the Authority will be subject to such special measures as the Authority deems appropriate, which may include—

- (a) being required to work on improvement projects with or take instruction from the Authority, the relevant Government department, or such other bodies or authorities as the Authority deems appropriate; and
- (b) financial penalties.”’

New clause 26—*Independent review: companies exiting a special administration regime*—

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within six months of the passing of this Act, either—

- (a) commission an independent review, or
- (b) take steps to extend the terms of reference of any existing independent review or commission,

to consider the merits of changing the law to provide that a water company exiting a special administration regime becomes a company mutually owned by its customers.

(2) A review under subsection (1) must consider—

- (a) the general merits of mutual ownership of water companies in such circumstances, and
- (b) what model of mutual ownership would be most suitable.

(3) The Secretary of State must, as soon as practicable after receiving a report of a review under subsection (1), lay before both Houses of Parliament—

- (a) a copy of the report, and
- (b) a statement setting out the Secretary of State’s response to that report.”

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to commission an independent review of the potential merits of changing the law so that a water company exiting a special administration regime becomes a company mutually owned by its customers.

Amendment 23, in clause 1, page 1, line 11, at end insert—

“(1A) The Authority must use its power under subsection (1) to issue rules which require—

- (a) the interests of customers, and
- (b) the environment,

to be listed as primary objectives in a relevant undertaker’s Articles of Association.”

Amendment 15, in clause 1, page 2, line 3, at end insert—

“(d) requiring the management board of a relevant undertaker to include at least one representative of each of the following—

- (i) groups for the benefit and interests of consumers;
- (ii) groups for the benefit and interests of residents of the areas in which the undertaker is operational;
- (iii) experts in water and sewerage policy and management; and
- (iv) environmental interest groups.”

Amendment 16, in clause 1, page 2, line 3, at end insert—

“(d) preventing a relevant undertaker from employing any individual who has been employed by the Authority in the preceding three years.”

Amendment 17, in clause 2, page 4, line 34, after “occurrence” insert “and impact”. Amendment 19, in clause 2, page 5, line 15, after “occurrence” insert “and impact”.

Amendment 18, in clause 2, page 5, line 17, at end insert—

“(ea) the use the undertaker plans to make of nature-based solutions for reducing the occurrence and impact of pollution incidents.”

Amendment 11, in clause 3, page 7, line 35, at end insert—

“(e) the volume of the discharge.”

Amendment 12, in clause 3, page 7, line 38, leave out “subsection (1)(d)” and insert “subsections (1)(d) and (e)”.

Amendment 1, in clause 3, page 8, line 5, at end insert—

“(c) be published on the home page of the undertaker’s website.”

This amendment would ensure that information regarding a discharge from an emergency overflow must be published on the home page of the undertaker’s website.

Amendment 13, in clause 3, page 8, line 5, at end insert—

“(c) be uploaded and updated automatically, where possible; (d) be made available on the undertaker’s website alongside searchable and comparable historic data.”

Amendment 14, in clause 3, page 8, line 5, at end insert—

“(3A) The undertaker must ensure that, within 12 months of the passing of this Act, appropriate monitors are installed to collect the information required by subsection (1).”

Amendment 22, in clause 3, page 8, line 27, leave out from start to “in” and insert

“a Minister with specific responsibility for issues relating to the coast.”

Amendment 2, in clause 3, page 9, line 23, at end insert—

“141H Failure to report discharge from emergency overflows

(1) If a relevant undertaker fails to comply with its duties under section 141F—

- (a) the undertaker commits an offence, and
- (b) the chief executive of the undertaker commits an offence, subject to subsection (2).

(2) It is a defence for the chief executive to prove that they took all reasonable steps to avoid the failure.

(3) A person who commits an offence under this section is liable, on summary conviction or conviction on indictment, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 5 years or an unlimited fine, or both.”

This amendment would make it an offence for an undertaker to fail to comply with its duty to report discharges from emergency overflows.

Amendment 3, in clause 3, page 9, line 23, at end insert—

“141H Restriction on the use of emergency overflows in areas used for aquatic sports

(1) A sewerage undertaker must not permit a discharge from an emergency overflow in an area used for aquatic sports.

(2) In this section, an “area used for aquatic sports” is a section of any body of water connected to and within a one mile radius of—

- (a) the clubhouse of a rowing club affiliated with British Rowing,
- (b) a Royal Yacht association training centre or the clubhouse of an affiliate member, and
- (c) the properties or facilities used by any organisation that the Secretary of State deems to provides water-based sporting activities for the purpose of teaching, training or leisure.

(3) If a relevant undertaker fails to comply with its duties under section (1)—

- (a) the undertaker commits an offence, and
- (b) the chief executive of the undertaker commits an offence, subject to subsection (4).

(4) It is a defence for the chief executive to prove that they took all reasonable steps to avoid the failure

(5) A person who commits an offence under this section is liable, on summary conviction or conviction on indictment, to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 5 years or an unlimited fine, or both.”

This amendment creates an offence for a sewerage undertaker to use an emergency overflow in an area used for aquatic sports.

Amendment 20, in clause 4, page 9, line 29, leave out “use that is to be made of”

and insert

“priority that is to be given to”.

Amendment 21, in clause 9, page 13, line 40, leave out from “duties” to end of page 14, line 2.

Government amendment 4.

Amendment 9, in clause 12, page 15, line 34, leave out from “to” to “such” in line 36 and insert “recover from its creditors”.

Amendment 26, in clause 12, page 15, line 39, at end insert—

“(2A) The Secretary of State may not require or permit any modified charges to be imposed on persons who do not receive services from the company for the purposes of making good any SAO loss.”

Amendment 10, in clause 13, page 18, line 13, leave out from “to” to “such” in line 15 and insert “recover from its creditors”.

Amendment 27, in clause 13, page 18, line 18, at end insert—

“(2A) The Secretary of State may not require or permit any modified charges to be imposed on persons who do not receive services from the company for the purposes of making good any SAO loss.”

Amendment 24, in clause 15, page 21, line 4, leave out subsections (2) to (8) and insert—

“(2) The provisions of this Act come into force on the day on which this Act is passed.”

Government amendments 5, 6, 7 and 8.

Emma Hardy: What a delight it is to be back in the Chamber debating this transformational Bill. I will keep my opening comments brief, because I know that many want to speak, and I will respond to amendments tabled by hon. Members when closing this debate after hon. Members have spoken to them, as is established practice.

I want to start by thanking all members of the Public Bill Committee for their careful consideration and scrutiny of the Bill and, dare I say, their comradeship in discussions and debates. It is clear that this is an area that everyone acknowledges is in need of change and reform. I also thank the Chairs, the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) and my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq). It was a pleasure to serve under them.

Since being in Committee, I have had several further insightful conversations on the Bill with Members from across the House and on the amendments tabled by the Government for consideration on Report, which I will take the opportunity to speak to now. I will start with Government amendment 4, which is a minor and technical amendment that ensures that clause 10 encompasses new enforcement functions arising from the changes made to clause 2 in the other place.

Government amendment 4 clarifies that cost recovery powers for the Environment Agency, expanded by the provisions in clause 10, also extend to costs incurred when enforcing the requirement to publish implementation plans. That requirement was added on Report in the Lords after cross-party discussions and collaboration. The amendment also clarifies that EA cost recovery powers concerning both pollution incident reduction plans and implementation reports are available for plans covering areas that are wholly or mainly in Wales, as well as for plans covering England, which are already included in clause 10. Such clarifications ensure that the

EA regulators in both England and Wales can fully recover costs for the extent of their water company enforcement activities and carry out their duties and functions effectively.

The Government have tabled amendments 5 to 7 in order to commence clause 1 on Royal Assent. That will give Ofwat and companies certainty on when the powers to make rules on remuneration and governance will come into force and will therefore be useful to companies in planning for the 2025-26 financial year. Commencement of clause 1 on Royal Assent will ensure Ofwat can implement its rules as soon as possible following its statutory consultation with relevant persons, which include the Secretary of State, Welsh Ministers and the Consumer Council for Water. I know that some Members have expressed concerns around the timeline over which Ofwat's rules will come into effect. I therefore hope the alteration to the commencement provisions for clause 1 will reassure those Members that the Government and the regulators are absolutely committed to ensuring Ofwat's rules are put in place as quickly as possible.

I now turn to new clause 18, which is the most substantial of the Government amendments. As I have stated before, this Government are a Government of service, and we are absolutely committed to taking action to address water poverty. We are working with industry to keep existing support schemes under review to ensure vulnerable customers across the country are supported. We also expect companies to hold themselves accountable for their public commitment to end water poverty by 2030 and will work with the sector to ensure appropriate measures are taken to deliver that.

That is why we have tabled the new clause, which adds to the existing powers to provide for special charging arrangements for customers in need. The new provision will enable water companies to provide consistent support for consumers across the country. It will also allow for automatic enrolment on any future scheme and broader information sharing between public authorities and water companies. The clause imposes a requirement for consultation on any future scheme, and it also amends the Digital Economy Act 2017 to ensure that water companies identify eligible customers and that they get the full support to which they are entitled.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way and for her ongoing discussions about drainage and local authorities and other water-related matters. On the issue of water poverty, can she confirm that, either as part of the Bill or as an adjunct to it, when water companies fail to deliver an adequate service in new build situations—where new houses are built, but the water infrastructure is insufficient to furnish those new houses with the proper supply of water—the Bill and the regulatory environment that she has just described will allow customers to get their entitlement and to free themselves from water poverty, as she put it?

Emma Hardy: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention and also for the many times that he has talked to me about internal drainage boards since I became a Minister. On his question, if customers are not getting the service to which they are entitled, that is absolutely something that should be taken through Ofwat and the regulators. I am more than happy to pick that matter up with him outside the Chamber.

[Emma Hardy]

I hope that Members across the House will agree that new clause 18 is a welcome addition to the Bill, ensuring that the Government have the necessary powers in place to bring forward secondary legislation in future—once we have thoroughly considered all options for improving the support available for vulnerable customers.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): Does the Minister agree that it is supremely unjust that, in Wales, customers face some of the highest bills for their water, despite having some of the lowest incomes in the United Kingdom?

Emma Hardy: Bills have obviously had to increase in the latest price review because we have had record levels of under-investment in our infrastructure. However, new clause 18 is intended to ensure greater fairness. It is important for struggling customers that he, as the local Member of Parliament, is talking to the water companies to ensure that they are informed about the support mechanisms that are available, and about how they can access them and everything else to which they are entitled.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): I am extremely grateful to the Minister for giving way. She will know that just 7% of outfalls were monitored when Labour last left office. I am pleased to say that that figure is now 100%. Does she not agree that new clause 16 would ensure that the fines collected from polluting water companies through the water restoration fund, which was founded by the Conservatives in 2022, are used to improve and prevent further deterioration of our waterways, including our precious chalk streams? Will she now do what we all look to Ministers to do, which is pirouette at the Dispatch Box, recognise the rightness of the cause and change course?

Emma Hardy: The right hon. Gentleman is indeed an eager beaver. As much as I do not wish to pour water on his enthusiasm, I will of course respond to all the amendments at the end of this stage of the Bill, as protocol expects. I hope he is able to contain his excitement, and is looking forward to my final comments on that area. And I shall be practising my pirouettes in anticipation.

I wish to pay special thanks to the Welsh Government, the Deputy First Minister and the officials who have worked so openly and collaboratively with the UK Government throughout the development and passage of this Bill. I also thank the Senedd for their consent, which we received on 21 January. I look forward to continuing to work closely with our Welsh counterparts to protect our rivers, lakes and seas, particularly those that cross our borders.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for all her work on this Bill. Does she agree that we have made much more progress on banning bosses' bonuses in the six months that we have been in office than the Conservatives did in 14 years?

Emma Hardy: That excellent point was well made by my hon. Friend. I hope all hon. Members agree that the amendments tabled by the Government will only strengthen this Bill and will support new clause 18.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. We have many contributions to come and quite a tight deadline, so Back Benchers will be limited to four minutes. I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): I appreciate the opportunity to discuss this vital issue of water quality once again. As His Majesty's most loyal Opposition have maintained through the passage of the Bill, it is just an attempt to copy and paste some of the work done by the previous Conservative Government and the measures taken to identify the problem. We will not shy away from the fact that the Conservative Government were the first to identify the scale of the sewage problem and actually to start to address it. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) just said, when Labour left office in 2010, only 7% of storm overflows were monitored. When we Conservatives left office last year, 100% were monitored and our landmark Environment Act 2021 paved the way to improving the quality of our precious waters.

However, we are under no illusions: there is always more that can be done, and we have always said that we will seek to work constructively to make the Bill as effective as possible. In that spirit, I thank the Minister for her willingness to discuss matters of the Bill with me and with colleagues across the House; the Minister in the other place, Baroness Hayman, showed an equal willingness to listen to suggestions from colleagues. I also thank members of the Bill Committee for their constructive approach and all the Bill team, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and parliamentary staff supporting this legislation and our scrutiny of it.

As a result of that dialogue, the Bill now includes welcome improvements in several areas, such as company requirements to produce implementation reports to outline how they envision their commitments on improving water quality happening, as well as consideration of nature-based solutions in licensing activities. However, in that same constructive spirit, the Opposition today ask the Government to go even further. We want the Government to back our new clause 16 mandating the water restoration fund, which had cross-party support in Committee. I thank the good folk of the Conservative Environment Network and Wildlife and Countryside Link for their support and campaigning on the new clause, as well as the Angling Trust for its discussions. I also thank the former MP for Ludlow and former Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee Philip Dunne for his assiduous efforts to see the fund introduced.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): These are very substantial sums. A water company in my region was fined £100 million the year before last. It is vital that these amounts go to our chalk streams, which are in desperate need of them.

Dr Hudson: I totally agree with my right hon. Friend. It is right that if water companies do the wrong thing, the money levied from them is ploughed back into improving the water and not back into Treasury coffers. The water restoration fund, since being introduced by the previous Conservative Government, provided £11 million for communities to repair their local waterways and restore them to the quality they should be.

Graham Stuart: To follow up the point made by our right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), that money will ultimately come from water bill payers. It will be ordinary families across the country who must contribute to the £100 million fines or whatever is imposed on our water companies. For that to be taken and then swallowed by the Treasury, rather than used to improve water, would be a disgrace. Does he not agree that the Government must accept new clause 16?

Dr Hudson: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. I will come on to an amendment we have also tabled to ensure that if fines are levied on water companies, customers' bills go down accordingly, so that taxpayers and bill payers are not penalised for water companies doing the wrong thing.

The Government have made ejections in this House and in the other place to the principle of ringfencing the funding and have stated the need for the Treasury to have flexibility on how it spends that money, but in this specific case, their argument still does not stack up. Where money comes from taxation, ringfencing is not always the most reliable way to ensure that the Treasury can have the spending power it needs to deliver that spending, but here we are talking about something very different. Fines are much more uncertain and provide less of a guarantee regarding the amount of money they will bring in. To rely on those funds for day-to-day Treasury spending does not make sense. Ringfencing those penalties for our water restoration fund is a sensible measure that enables Governments to guarantee they can meet a specific need. Water companies pay the fines for the damage they have done, and the local communities affected are empowered to have their local waterways restored.

It is worth repeating the finer detail of our amendment; it should not go ignored that this will also improve chalk streams. It was incredibly disappointing that over Christmas, the Government revealed that they had abandoned plans by the Conservatives to recover our chalk streams. Given that England is home to 80% of the world's chalk streams, a failure to act on this issue neglects a vital duty to protect a key part of our environment. In light of this, we believe that the Government need to think again about rejecting our important amendment, which is a matter of principle, a matter of justice in righting wrongs, and a fundamental commitment to water quality.

When it comes to improving our waters, it is supporting those who are most affected when water companies fail to abide by their duties that are at the heart of the Opposition's concerns—the British public, as individual consumers, bill payers and members of local communities. Customers must not pay the price for water companies' failure to do their duties, whether financial, environmental or otherwise. As such, the Opposition have tabled new clause 19, which would require the DEFRA Secretary of State to provide that where a water company has faced financial penalties for failure to comply with the law, a financial amount equal to those penalties must be removed from the bills of that water company's consumers.

This is very important, as a toxic cocktail of poor behaviour by water companies and rising bill prices has led to many people feeling that they are receiving poor value for money and not getting the quality water services

that they deserve. A concomitant reduction in customer bills that people will see directly on their statements will be a real and tangible sign that poor behaviour is not going unchecked. The Government have previously rejected the proposal, but we urge them to think again about this simple yet effective amendment that would do so much to underpin all the work that is being done and protect bill payers.

I turn to some of our further amendments. Our concerns about the water industry and finances extend to what is in the Bill as it stands—in particular, the provisions for special administration orders in clauses 12 and 13, which the Opposition have raised in the other place and in Committee. Those clauses would give the Government the power to recover any losses they make through placing a company in special administration by raising consumer bills. My Conservative colleagues in the other place sounded the alarm on this issue, and I put on record again my thanks to them for doing so. If water companies require the Government to place them in special administration through their own failure, why should consumers foot the bill for failures they have had no influence on or responsibility for? That is particularly the case if a customer's bills will rise as a result of mismanagement by a company whose services they do not even rely on.

This proposal runs contrary to the nature of all the action taken in recent years to improve water quality, whereby companies that are responsible for failing to get their affairs in order must take responsibility. We have all been starkly aware of concerns surrounding the financial resilience of Thames Water, and as many will know, Ofwat's "Monitoring financial resilience" report in November identified 10 companies that needed an increased level of monitoring and/or engagement concerning financial resilience. We acknowledge that the Government believe that they expect to use special administration orders as a last resort and in limited circumstances. However, it is the Opposition's firm belief that an injustice remains, with people having to pay for companies that they have no connection to. We have therefore tabled amendments 26 and 27, which would explicitly forbid the raising of prices for consumers who do not use the services of the water company that is in special administration. We believe this is a fair and reasonable compromise that the Government should accept, so that we can work to improve the water industry's financial practices.

We have also tabled new clause 17, which would amend the Water Industry Act 1991 to insert new rules regarding limits on the amount of money that can be borrowed by a water company. Regrettably, the Government rejected this sensible measure in Committee, so we have tabled it again to ensure that water companies do not excessively borrow money, which is ultimately bad for bill payers. When we talk about financial resilience, the heart of the issue is concern about borrowing, and the resultant over-leveraging in the industry. We will be pushing that new clause to a Division. We will also be supporting the measures on nature recovery that we tabled in Committee.

We will be looking very closely at some of the amendments from the Liberal Democrats. New clause 2, which they tabled in Committee, would abolish Ofwat. At that stage, we pointed out that the new clause was not explicit about what it would transition to, so we do not believe that is a sensible way forward.

[Dr Hudson]

New clause 18 would grant the Government a power to create a unified scheme of charging arrangements for customers in need of support regardless of the specific supplier, and introduce a consultation for that purpose. Although the Opposition welcome looking at that, can the Government please ensure that others consumers do not face rising bills as a result? It will be interesting to see what the Government do with that.

5 pm

To conclude, we urge the Government not to waste this opportunity to make this Bill properly effective. Members on both sides of the House want a clean water system, a healthy water environment, financially resilient water companies and fairness for the consumer. The Government have the opportunity to work towards that, with the constructive suggestions made by His Majesty's loyal Opposition. We have made those suggestions at all stages of the Bill, and we urge the Government to take them forward.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Back Benchers are on a four-minute limit.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

First, I thank EFRA Ministers for the work they have done on this Bill, and for everything they have been doing in working on the consultation. It is quite clear to most of the public that not only is England's privatised model of water failing, but it is an extreme ideological outlier. It is one of the worst for costs and results. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) is chuntering away in his place. We need a long-term, patient approach, especially given the climate crisis, and that is fundamentally incompatible with privatisation.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): While the chief executive officer of Thames Water was getting £195,000 in bonuses, we in Harpenden and Berkhamsted saw over 100 days of non-stop sewage in our river, which is a chalk stream. The same is now happening again, one year later, with 1,000 hours of non-stop sewage. Does the hon. Member agree that the system clearly does not work, and that such bonuses do not provide the right incentives?

Clive Lewis: I agree with the hon. Lady. I hope her party comes to its senses at some point—maybe in the same way that my party needs to come to its senses—and accept that some form of public ownership will probably be the best way to resolve that.

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): Have you?

Clive Lewis: That is my personal view; I put that on the record.

These companies have legal obligations first and foremost to their shareholders, which means short-term profit maximisation. When water was privatised, to quote from Unison's recent report on this matter, to

“ensure the commercial success of the companies, the government wrote off all the existing debts of the RWAs”—

regional water authorities—

“(£6.5 billion in total) and gave the private companies £7.7 billion of public subsidies in tax relief on profits.”

It has come to my attention that even some former chief executives of water companies fear for the future of the industry, because good investors have by and large exited it. It is now the Macquaries and vulture capitalists of this world that dominate shareholding.

This issue goes far beyond regulation. Indeed, our own regulator, Ofwat, has been found wanting, as its own growth duty prioritises business as usual. In other areas, the Government have quite rightly recognised and embraced the value of public ownership, such as in rail and with Great British Energy. Unfortunately, when it comes to water companies there seems to be an inconsistency in Government policy. Many of us on this side of the House ran on a manifesto commitment to reduce the cost of living, and that commitment is one that I think every Labour MP believes in. However, the cost of corruption and of extraction by a private water company should under no circumstances, as is currently configured in the Bill, land on the heads of our constituents should any of these companies go bust or be taken into special administration.

Water is a monopoly industry, which means that bill payers and taxpayers are the same. What message would it send to our constituents if they are asked to pay, via their bills or via tax, to make a payout for the mistakes and excesses of privatised water?

Graham Stuart: Doubtless the behaviour of the privatised firms should be looked at closely, but one of the fundamentals of having a state-run system for such long-term assets was that they were chronically under-invested. They could never win out in the political battle between schools, hospitals and long-term water infrastructure, and only privatisation allowed the record investment that has gone in since. The hon. Gentleman ought to recognise that in trying to get the balance right.

Clive Lewis: I do recognise that, and not for one second am I calling for nationalisation, which is the model the right hon. Member was talking about. There is a plethora of possibilities for public ownership, from mutualisation through to giving regional authorities more scope, and even working with the private sector. We must ensure that the public have a critical say over the future of water, and there are multiple forms that public ownership can take. I am not necessarily in favour of 1970s-style nationalisation, which is pretty much what they have in Scotland at the moment.

I will, however, ask those on the Front Bench to consider new clause 8 and ensure that our constituents—the people we came into politics for—do not foot a single penny more for the failures of privatised water. Investors, shareholders and creditors should be the ones who take the haircut. They should be the ones who foot the bill because of what they have done to our water. This should not be landing on the heads of our constituents. This is a political choice, and I urge my Government to make it clear that we will always back the public, not the private companies that have got us into this mess.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I pay tribute to the Minister and the Bill team from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs who are in the Chamber, as well as to all my colleagues who sat on the Committee for what was a genuinely enjoyable and collegiate experience. I hope they will forgive me for making a few criticisms in the next few minutes.

We tabled 44 amendments in Committee, but only 34 today, you will be delighted to know Madam Deputy Speaker—[*Interruption.*] I know—I am failing. I will not speak to all of them for blindingly obvious reasons. We tabled those amendments because we in the Liberal Democrats, humbly yet enthusiastically, have taken on the mantle in this place and beyond of being the voice for many thousands of campaigners, volunteers and citizen scientists who continue to lead the way in exposing the failures and injustices in the water industry, and fighting for meaningful change. We are immensely grateful to those people all across the country.

Our water industry has become a money-making vessel for speculators, who appear to care little for the quality of our rivers, lakes and seas—something I can tell the House is a source of great fury in England's precious Lake district. The water companies have accumulated £70 billion in debt since privatisation, while still managing to pay out £83 billion in dividends. That is more than a third of the total spent on infrastructure during that time. In the last year, water companies paid out £9.3 million in executive bonuses, and Thames Water's bonuses doubled to £1.3 million that year. Money leaks out of the industry, infrastructure is failing, and it is our constituents who pay the price.

Meanwhile the regulatory framework has failed utterly and is not fit for purpose. As I speak, £164 million in fines has been levied against water companies by Ofwat, following an investigation that began four years ago, of which it has so far failed to collect a single penny.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Thames Water has had an increase in the number of pollution incidents, which went up 40% in six months last year. It has been issued with fines, but that has not changed anything. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need regulation with proper teeth, and that new clause 25 would do exactly that by putting water companies into special measures when they fail our constituents?

Tim Farron: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend. The water companies simply do not fear Ofwat, or indeed any other part of our fragmented regulatory system. They dwarf Ofwat in terms of resources, they flout the limited regulations that they face, and they run rings around the regulators and obviously get away with it. There was the outrage of the water companies being permitted, just before Christmas, to increase water bills by 36% by 2030, and what makes it even worse is that a third of customers' bills are being spent just on servicing the debt—a debt that was in part run up to fund excessive dividends.

Water companies are already passing on the consequences of their complete financial mismanagement to our constituents—their customers—but this Bill could enable that to go further and to be even worse. According to the Government's explanatory notes,

“following the provision of financial assistance by the Secretary of State to a company in special administration”,

clause 12 of the Bill, as drafted, would

“require a water company to raise amounts of money determined by the Secretary of State from its consumers, and to pay those amounts to the Secretary of State to make good any shortfall”.

In other words, when a water company goes into special administration, there is a cost to the Government of ensuring that supply is maintained, and the Government need to recoup that cost. That sounds reasonable at first glimpse, but it does not seem reasonable that bill payers should have to pick up the tab, despite bearing none of the blame for the financial mess a water company finds itself in.

My hon. Friends and I are keen to press amendment 9, which would make it explicit that it should be the creditors of the companies—the big financial investors that have loaded debt on to the water companies—that cover those costs instead. The amendment would strike out the Government's provision in the Bill that opens up bill payers to carrying the cost of paying off company debt, even in the event of bankruptcy.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I fear that the Government's drive for growth has meant that they have become fearful of the tough regulation that my hon. Friend suggests. They see it only as an impediment, instead of the basis for a stable economy. Does he agree that weak regulation is not only bad for consumers and for the environment, but also for investment over the long run?

Tim Farron: Somebody representing the water industry will say that the water industry, as structured, is deeply unappealing to investors. There is a case for changing the model of how we structure those companies. When a company goes into special administration, we do not think it is right that innocent customers should have to foot the bill. The management of those companies, and their investors and creditors, are responsible for the mess the company is in. They took the risks and speculated in order to make money, so it is only right that they should have to cover the costs of the risks that they took, not our constituents.

One of the positive aspects of the Bill is the Government's decision to deploy volunteers, citizen scientists and campaigners to ensure scrutiny of the water industry. Only last week, I spent time speaking with the leaders of the Save Windermere campaign and the Clean River Kent Campaign. I also enjoyed getting my hands dirty and my legs very wet alongside the Eden Rivers Trust in the River Eden not long ago. We are lucky across the whole country to have passionate, committed, expert volunteers who are dedicated to cleaning up and protecting our precious waterways, yet we are saddened that the Government have failed to provide those volunteers with the resources they need or the power they deserve.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that one kind of support that such community groups need is water restoration grants? Those are vital and will flow from the water restoration fund, which is the subject of one of his amendments. Those funds are vital to cleaning up bathing waters across the country.

Tim Farron: Those funds are vital. Bathing water status is important. We hope that DEFRA will come out with new criteria soon so that places such as the River Kent can bid to be included.

[Tim Farron]

We have tabled new clauses 4, 10, 13 and 15, which between them would strengthen the hand of those wonderful volunteers, including by ensuring that the Government's proposed live database, which we support, retains comprehensive historical data. If it does not, the Government are expecting campaigners to be watching that database 24/7. If they have the temerity to go to sleep, look after their kids or go to work, they may miss something. If we are to back campaigners and volunteers, the least we can do is give them the tools to scrutinise water companies' performance. Knowledge is power, and our amendments would give those campaigners knowledge and power.

New clause 11 and amendment 14 address monitoring. Event duration monitors tell us how long a spill took place over. For instance, they tell us that last February, United Utilities spilled into Windermere for 10 hours in one go, but those monitors do not tell us anything about volume. As a result, they do not tell us enough about the impact of sewage spills on the ecology and wildlife of our waterways. It is equally possible to have a long duration trickle or a short duration deluge of sewage into our lakes, rivers and seas. New clause 11 would insist that water companies have to measure and report on the volume of discharges and that regulators hold them to it.

New clause 25 would put into law concrete pollution targets and proper penalties when companies fail to meet them. Companies who fail to meet those targets would be put into what we are calling special measures, meaning that they would be subject to financial penalties and/or be made to undertake a specific improvement project. No water company chief executive will quake in their boots if they are not held to targets that are ambitious and enforceable with penalties, and which actually mean something.

5.15 pm

Water industry staff do amazing work, giving us the world's cleanest drinking water and working their socks off to tackle and repair leaks, to bolster infrastructure and to oversee the operation of waste water treatment systems to serve our communities. They are just as much victims as their fellow bill payers of the utterly failed system that we are faced with. The system has failed for two key reasons: inadequate regulation and a broken ownership and financial model. That is why we propose through new clause 2 the abolition of Ofwat and the creation of a new consolidated super-regulator, with the power, focus and resource to hold the water industry to account and to enforce stronger rules.

New clause 26 would migrate water companies away from the failed privatised model and towards mutual ownership status. This would prevent the water industry from being used as a cash cow for speculators, where bill payers pay the price through higher bills and sewage-infested rivers and lakes, and instead create a form of ownership where a "low risk, with modest but reliable reward" model would ensure that we attract responsible investors and prevent money leaking out of the system in the form of unearned dividends and immoral financing of colossal debt.

We recognise the Government's decision to present the Bill now and hold out the hope of more radical change later in the Parliament, following the recommendations

of Sir Jon Cunliffe's review. We confess, however, to suffering from extreme raised eyebrow syndrome today, as it has been revealed that a former Thames Water executive has been appointed to Sir Jon's independent water commission. That does not fill us with enormous confidence.

The Bill is okay—it is even good in parts—but it would be significantly better with the Liberal Democrats' suggested amendments. We humbly ask right hon. and hon. Members to support those amendments, and especially amendment 9, to give the British people the radical water industry clean-up that they voted for.

Catherine Fookes: I thank the Minister for bringing forward the Bill so fast in the first six months of the Government. It was an honour to sit on the Bill Committee and to engage in constructive discussion with hon. Members from across the House. However, I must take issue with the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) and his veritable smorgasbord of amendments and new clauses. I will not support them, because, let us remember, this is just the first step in cleaning up the appalling mess we have been left with our water companies. I am sure that the commission will bring forward ideas for more legislation.

I grew up in the countryside on a farm, and one of my favourite memories was running down the garden and out into the river at the bottom, going for a walk and splashing through the streams. I and my family took it for granted that we could just mess about in the streams. Apart from really annoying my mum when I got back by leaving a messy puddle of water on the floor, there was never any fear that I would get sick or that I had been wading through sewage. What a change there has been, with parents now worried about their children going into the water. They cannot run helter-skelter into the local chalk stream for fear that they will get an ear infection or an eye infection, or perhaps encounter a wet wipe or something much worse.

Sadly, the health of the Wye and the Usk, our two majestic rivers in Monmouthshire, has really suffered over the past 14 years. I have spent many happy hours walking alongside them, seeing herons and kingfishers, and we have had some of our happiest family days out there. The dreadful state that those two rivers are in makes them two really good examples of the 14 years of Conservative failure and flimflam. We have record levels of illegal sewage dumping in our rivers, lakes and seas, and chronic ongoing diffuse pollution from agriculture.

In every constituency across the UK there are amazing groups of citizen scientists who have really brought our rivers to the fore. I pay tribute to Save the River Usk and Friends of the River Wye in Monmouthshire, who are among the best in the UK. *[Interruption.]* I am afraid that I will not give way as we are under extreme time pressure. One of my key promises in the election campaign was to work to clean up our rivers. Feargal Sharkey endorsed my campaign—when someone like him endorses a campaign, we know that we will be held to account. That is why I am so pleased that in the last six months we have done more than the Conservatives and the Lib Dems when they were in coalition.

I am proud that we are already standing here debating the Bill, only six months in. It will bring criminal charges against persistent lawbreakers, with penalties including imprisonment. In addition, the cost recovery powers of

regulators will be expanded to ensure that water companies bear the cost of enforcement action taken in response to their failings.

We have been left a very difficult legacy due to the disastrous inaction of the Tories and the Lib Dems when they were in coalition. It will take much more work and many years across borders, with both farmers and water companies, to restore our rivers, but the Bill makes an excellent start to cleaning up the horrific mess. It will mean that in future, I hope, parents will be able to allow their children to run helter-skelter into their local rivers and streams.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): I would like to speak to amendments 2 and 3, tabled in my name. Amendment 2 would further strengthen the Bill by making it a criminal offence for water companies to fail to report discharge from emergency overflows. Amendment 3 would prohibit such discharge in river areas such as the Thames that are used for aquatic sports.

I have the privilege of representing the towns and villages of Beaconsfield, Marlow, Bourne End and the south Bucks villages. Unfortunately, we are served by Thames Water, and we have some of the highest levels of fines in the country. We are blessed with a beautiful waterway setting throughout my constituency, including the River Thames. Our area is rich in watersport clubs—the Marlow rowing club, the Marlow canoe club and the Upper Thames sailing club to name but three. Young people from high schools and grammar schools use the Thames for their water sports as well.

Amendment 3 would give water used for aquatic sports the same protection as that used for bathing. It would establish clear consequences for water companies and their chief executives where they fail to comply with a clear duty to protect the water in which people practise aquatic sports, particularly rowing. That is particularly true of Thames Water and of the Thames. I appreciate the cross-party support in Committee on these amendments.

Aquatic sports are an important part of our sporting heritage in this country, but storm overflow discharge into our rivers has adversely affected the health of participants, creating an ongoing health risk to rowing, sailing, canoeing and other aquatic sports clubs along the Thames and across the country. Many clubs, particularly in places such as Marlow, take their duty of care very seriously, and are having to put in place their own monitoring systems to protect their members.

Amendment 3 would ensure that water used for aquatic sports was put on the same statutory footing as bathing water. It is time for water companies to take responsibility for ensuring that those waters are safe to use, and to protect our young people for the future. The amendments set out a reasonable expectation that a water company must not discharge an emergency overflow within a 1-mile radius of an area used for aquatic sports. The definition of such an area is clearly outlined, and further discretion is provided for the Secretary of State to determine such areas where needed. The amendment would bring much-needed support to our vital aquatic sports.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): My hon. Friend and constituency neighbour and I, along with my hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) and the former Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip, have held a

number of meetings with local stakeholders and the Canal & River Trust about these issues, which affect the River Colne, which crosses our respective constituencies. Does she share my appreciation of the measures introduced by the last Government, which ensure effective monitoring? Will she join me in thanking Conservative-led Hertfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Hillingdon councils for their work to ensure that watersports users have access to good quality, clean facilities?

Joy Morrissey: My hon. Friend raises an excellent point—the previous Government put in place monitoring for all waterways so that we can hold water companies to account. He mentioned the cross-border and cross-party efforts, but mainly those of the Conservative councils that worked together to hold Thames Water and other water companies to account.

I was surprised that the Government did not readily accept amendment 3, as it is not party political. It is about necessary support for our vital aquatic sports clubs, and would further strengthen the protection of waterways used for aquatic sports across the country. That would include the Thames and other rivers across England, many in areas where young people access waterways and where there is storm overflow. I urge the Government to accept these reasonable and important amendments to strengthen the Bill.

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): Water quality and sewage pollution is one of the most pressing issues in my constituency. In the past year alone, we have had 57 sewage dumps—the equivalent of 594 hours of sewage spilled—at Bournemouth pier. As many Members will know, Bournemouth pier is a place where people surf, paddleboard, swim and walk their dogs. It is a magnet for tourism. This is more than just an environmental issue; it is a public health issue, with people frequently getting sick from swimming in the sea. It also has massive economic consequences for my constituency, which thousands of people visit over the summer. It is impacting our reputation, our businesses and our tourism industry. However, it is also a matter of deep pride for my constituents. We are proud to be one of the most beautiful bits of coastline in the UK—we are often ranked in the top 20 in Europe. My constituents want to enjoy those coastal waters, not be afraid to go in them. It is a situation that cannot be allowed to continue.

I am truly glad the Conservatives have found some vim on this issue, but I gently remind them that we did not come to power in a vacuum. We are facing a Victorian situation with the amount of sewage, and that comes from a failure to deal with systemic issues. *[Interruption.]* Despite their protestations, the Conservatives' actions have spoken louder than their words. Under the previous Government, we heard talk of scrapping nutrient neutrality, and they slashed the Environment Agency's budget, with the then water Minister instructing the Environment Agency not to publish data. We have heard all about the increase in monitoring, but if they knew so much about the problem, why did they not do anything about it? It is a little too late for that. It is Labour that is bringing forward the legislation to deal with this issue.

I am proud to support this Bill, with its provisions for criminal liability and banning bonuses. The amendments the Minister has outlined today, in particular to improve transparency, give industry certainty and speed up the implementation of these measures, are so important.

[*Jessica Toale*]

I end by saying that my constituents will welcome the actions taken by the Labour Government. We owe it to them and to the next generation to leave this country with seas, rivers and an environment that are protected and thriving.

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): I welcome the Bill. While its provisions are modest, I none the less welcome this step to improve on the failures of previous Conservative Governments on sewage pollution.

For too long, water companies have been allowed to operate without proper regulation and oversight. Since privatisation, English water companies have paid out £83 billion in dividends while amassing £74 billion in debt. Shockingly, with the Bill still making its way through the House, water companies have brazenly said that they plan to circumvent the ban on bonuses by jacking up C-suite salaries to compensate. The Bill must do more and be more ambitious to truly hold water companies to account. I am therefore pleased to support the new clauses in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), which would strengthen the Bill, improving monitoring, protecting consumers and ensuring responsibility falls on sewerage companies to clean up their act.

I will speak to amendment 9 and new clauses 11 and 21. Amendment 9 would ensure that creditors, not bill payers, pay for the bail-out of water companies in special measures. It would protect consumers against the reckless financial mismanagement of Thames Water. Ordinary bill payers should not be required to pay for the mistakes of a company they had no choice to use and the folly of investors that indulged it.

New clause 11 would require sewerage undertakers to install volume flow meters in all their locations where overflows occur. Campaign organisations in my constituency, including the famous Henley Mermaids, tell me that flow meters would help to inform them when it is safe to go in the water.

New clause 21 is also of special importance to my constituency, much of which is in the Chilterns national landscape. It would commit sewerage undertakers to secure and then maintain high ecological status in protected landscapes. It would require them to improve outflow from storm overflows in areas such as Goring, in my constituency, which lies within the Chilterns national landscape. My right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) would very much welcome that, as we both enjoyed stand-up paddleboard yoga in Goring in July.

5.30 pm

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman paints a beautiful picture. How much does he think it would cost to implement and how much would that cost impact on bill payers?

Freddie van Mierlo: The measures we propose should be taken in the round. All our amendments significantly improve the Bill.

New clause 21 would also improve sewage outflow in Henley-on-Thames and the villages along the Thames Path national trail. That is desperately needed to end

the shame of welcoming the world to our beautiful town of Henley at the royal regatta, only to subject it to what we put down the toilet.

In conclusion, I welcome the Bill and the protections it will deliver to my constituents, but I hope the Government will consider going further very soon.

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): I thank the Minister for all the hard work she and her team have been doing on the Bill. It is very important to my constituents.

To go back to the very basics, we are talking about something that everybody in North East Derbyshire uses every day—water. I believe that everybody in my constituency, and in the whole country, has a right to know that the water in our rivers and streams is clean, clear and free from pollution. The reason I have to state that now in this House is that we have not had the action we should have had over the past 14 years. That is a huge failure of the previous Government to get action taken and completed on this important issue. Instead, in 2023 water was polluted over 2,000 times in North East Derbyshire—and that is in just one constituency.

Last week, I met local residents in Ashover, which is situated on the River Amber, in my constituency. They impressed on me their concerns about pollution in that very picturesque part of the river. We have had good news, in that Severn Trent Water has improved treatment tank capacity in the area, but my residents are worried that that will not be enough, and indeed that we will not know whether it is enough. They are already concerned that the water they see does not live up to the standards they wish to see. That is why I particularly welcome the fact that the Bill is bringing in independent monitoring of water quality. I am afraid I disagree with the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron). What I think is important is not that we get carried away with volume, but the impact on water quality. That is what matters most.

Tim Farron: They are not mutually exclusive, are they? Knowing the duration of a spill is important, but knowing what went into it and how much also helps to know the impact so we can regulate it. Is that not true?

Louise Jones: The Bill looks at the result—the impact. I do not understand why we need to look at the volume if we are looking at the impact.

A huge amount has been spent on bosses' bonuses: over £9 million in 2023-24. To put that into perspective, the average salary in my constituency is just over £30,000. If bonuses are received, we expect it to be for work well done and not just as a matter of course for the failings those bosses are responsible for.

Time and time again, we heard from the former Government that the water industry would change. Unfortunately, it did not under the previous measures, and that is why I welcome the action to ensure results as soon as possible. The Bill will mean cleaner rivers, which is my hope for the River Amber and what my constituents deserve; better infrastructure; better protection for those who use our waters for leisure activities; and better protection for the nature in our beautiful constituency. That is why it has my full support.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): My constituency of Bridgwater has the Rivers Axe, Brue, Parrett and Tone within its boundaries, together with countless streams, brooks and rhynes. It is therefore of the utmost importance to my constituents that the water quality of our rivers is maintained and improved. The town of Burnham-on-Sea and Highbridge is a coastal resort, as are the villages of Berrow and Brean. It is important for the tourism industry, as well as the local people who enjoy those beaches, that we improve the quality of our bathing water, and I therefore welcome the Bill. We are told that it has four key aims:

“To block the payment of bonuses to executives who pollute waterways;

To bring criminal charges against persistent law breakers;

To impose automatic and severe fines for wrongdoing; and

To ensure independent monitoring of every”

—sewer overflow—“outlet.”

I welcome all those aims, building as they do on the work of the last Government to improve our water quality.

I want to speak in favour of new clauses 16 and 19. New clause 16, entitled “Establishment of Water Restoration Fund”, establishes the principle that fines should go towards environmental improvement rather than to the Treasury. I am somewhat curious as to why the Government would not support that, but perhaps the Minister can explain when she responds to the debate. In November 2024, Wessex Water, which serves my constituency, was fined £500,000 for polluting two rivers, one in Wiltshire and one in Somerset. That money should be used to improve the local environment; it should not be swallowed up by the Treasury.

New clause 19 states that when civil penalties are imposed, there should be an equivalent reduction in customer bills. That is important, because otherwise the water company that has been fined will simply pass on that fine to the consumers; the new clause would ensure that there was no penalty for the customer. I am curious, again, to know why the Government would oppose new clause 19—along with new clause 16—and I look forward to hearing the Minister’s explanation.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): I thank the ministerial team for all their hard work in producing the Bill within six months of Labour’s election in July.

Is there anything more emblematic of the decline and mismanagement presided over by the last Government than the state of our rivers and waters? It was fascinating to hear from the shadow Minister that the Opposition seem suddenly to have realised that this is a bigger problem than they ever thought it was when they were in government. As we have heard from Members on both sides of the House, waterways throughout the country have been choked with record levels of sewage. In 2003, 39 sites in my constituency were polluted by Severn Trent Water and United Utilities. Across those sites, there were 2,579 sewage dumps—and what was the punishment for the bosses of those companies? Did any of them face imprisonment? Were their bonuses curtailed, or stopped entirely? Did they feel the hard edge of enforcement action? The answer is no.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): If the hon. Gentleman, as a Back-Bench MP, is presuming to

tell a regulator with criminal powers how to investigate and prosecute companies or indeed any defendants, we need to be very careful, because never before in our law have we permitted Members of Parliament and Ministers to direct independent investigators on whom to investigate and prosecute.

Jon Pearce: I welcome that intervention from the shadow Secretary of State, but let me suggest that if the measures in this Bill had been implemented by her Government, we might have seen some of those enforcement actions.

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way; he is very kind. I remind him that in 2002 a Labour Government allowed, through their regulatory regime, the uplift in bonuses that he outlined. Can he tell the House how much sewage dumping happened in his constituency between the years 1997 and 2010, and can he justify why only 7% of rivers were being monitored? He will not be able to, because we did not know.

Jon Pearce: I welcome the hon. Member’s intervention. I simply say to him that his party was in power for 14 years and did nothing. To go back 30 years seems rather extraordinary.

In 2002, the United Utilities chief executive received a bonus of nearly £1 million, and Severn Trent lifted its bonus to £3.36 million. That is millions of pounds that my constituents in High Peak have put in bosses’ back pockets to reward their failure. When I speak to residents on the doorstep in High Peak, they ask me, “How did they get away with it? How can they be allowed to do this?” They got away with it because Conservative Members let them. The previous Conservative Government cut the Environment Agency’s budget by half between 2010 and 2024, leaving the agency toothless to tackle the disgraceful behaviour of our water company bosses. Perhaps that helps us to understand the enforcement issues we have been talking about.

I also remember that just before the election, the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore), in his previous role as Water Minister, told Environment Agency officials not to publish the headline figures of the total number and duration of spills. How typical of the Conservative party’s approach—rather than face issues head-on and tackle them, it chose to hide them and keep them in the shadows. That approach to government has left our water infrastructure crumbling. By failing to confront these issues, failing to invest in our broken infrastructure and letting consumer money be spent irresponsibly, the Conservative Government left my constituents in High Peak paying twice.

These points underpin the importance of this legislation. This Bill, coupled with the Government’s wider programme to safeguard the environment, will ensure that the beauty of the Peak district in my constituency, with our nature-rich rivers, is entrenched for generations to come. The Bill introduces tougher penalties, including imprisonment for water executives who fail to comply with or obstruct investigations. The Bill will ban bonuses for CEOs and senior leaders unless high standards are met on protecting the environment and their consumers. The Bill will also introduce severe and automatic fines for offences, closing the gap in the Environment Agency’s enforcement powers.

[Jon Pearce]

Importantly, the water companies will have to start covering the costs of enforcement action. Unlike the previous Government, we will not let the water companies hide from their wrongdoing. The Bill will see that every outlet has independent monitoring.

I am proud to support this major step forward in the Government's wider reforms to fix the broken water system left behind by the Conservative party. This is a great first step, and a commission will look at the whole water industry, which will hopefully address some of the concerns raised by Members. Only by taking these actions with this ambitious plan, which the Government have done in their first six months in office, can we begin to turn the page on years of decline and attract much-needed investment into the sector, which will preserve the beauty of High Peak and the Peak district for the long term.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Unfortunately, colleagues making interventions have eaten into time, so I now have to call the Front Benchers. I call the shadow Minister, Dr Neil Hudson.

Dr Hudson: It has been a wide-ranging debate, although shorter than we had hoped for. I thank Members for participating today. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) for her passion for enhancing the accountability of water companies and protecting watersports, which we are all passionate about, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox) for passionately advocating for the water restoration fund.

New clause 16 would establish the water restoration fund, to ringfence money from fines to restore local waterways, not to balance the Treasury's books. This was a Conservative fund, and the Labour Government must not let ideology stand in the way of evidence-based policymaking. They must take the baton forward and ringfence this money, so that waterways can be restored locally.

Pippa Heylings: Will the hon. Member give way?

Dr Hudson: No, I have no time.

New clause 19 is designed to ensure that fines on water companies result in equivalent reductions in customers' bills. That is only fair, and we urge the Government to take forward the new clause.

New clause 17 seeks to strengthen the financial resilience of water companies by enabling the Secretary of State to stipulate the limits of borrowing, so that these companies do not leverage too much debt. That is an important new clause that needs to go forward.

Through amendments 26 and 27, we want to protect customers in different parts of the country so that they do not have to pay for the misdemeanours of water companies that do not serve them. We urge the Government to take forward our amendments and make this Bill stronger, so that we can improve our precious waterways.

5.45 pm

Emma Hardy: I thank Members for their constructive engagement throughout this debate. As I have said before, it is wonderful to hear the shared passion across

this House for improving the performance of the water sector so that it better delivers for customers and the environment. Given the limited time that I have to address over 50 amendments—I am not looking in any one direction—

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): The Minister makes reference to the very limited time. Why is that? This is a Government who hold general debates on Mondays and Thursdays. They have no business, yet we have less than two hours to debate this really important issue.

Emma Hardy: The hon. Member and I served on the Public Bill Committee, where we spent much time discussing many of the amendments. I cannot comment on decisions about the business of the House and urgent questions.

As I say, I will do my absolute best to cover all the points raised by hon. Members. I hope they accept that I generally try to be generous with interventions, but I want to put on the record my response to the amendments. I hope the House will give forgive me.

A number of hon. Members have tabled amendments that seek to increase transparency around water company operations and pollution incidents. The Government absolutely agree that greater transparency is needed to better enable the regulators and the public to hold water companies accountable. Although I have previously explained why it is not practical to prohibit all discharges from emergency overflows, which are a necessary safety valve in our sewage system, I reiterate this Government's commitment to reducing the harm caused by sewage discharge. Ensuring that all emergency overflows are monitored is a critical step in enabling the outcomes that we all want to see. Information on the frequency and duration of discharges will help to direct investment to further reduce sewage discharges into our waterways, and to better enable the public to make informed decisions about accessing their local waterways.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Emma Hardy: I will, but I have only 10 minutes.

Mr Mohindra: I thank the Minister for being so generous with her time. As she will be aware, the United Kingdom has most of the world's chalk streams, and the River Chess runs through my constituency. How can she ensure that we continue to monitor our unique environment and protect it from the threat of overflows, to which she just referred?

Emma Hardy: I share the hon. Gentleman's passion and love for chalk streams—the rainforests of the United Kingdom. Part of this Bill will drive the performance change in the industry that we want to see and reduce sewage discharges, which are doing such damage to such precious habitat.

Although some Members have called for the Government to go even further on monitoring, I reassure the House that we have carefully considered how best to increase transparency without driving unmanageable increases in customers' bills. As promised in Committee, I have provided a factsheet on this issue, and I can make it available in the House of Commons Library. Rolling out

event duration monitors over two price review periods will provide the best value for money for customers and the environment, and does not risk compromising water companies' ability to deliver other vital improvements to our sewage system.

It is important that we direct investment at improving the sewage network to decrease overflow charges, and not just at monitoring, particularly where it does not provide valuable insight into the harms associated with discharge. There is a balance to be struck, and I believe we have got it right. The public know that there is too much sewage in our waterways. Whichever way we look at it—be it through volume or duration—they know there is too much. The focus must be on reducing it.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): My hon. Friend talks about the importance of water quality. Will she join me in commending campaigns such as the Ilkley Clean River Group and other citizen scientists across the country? In the absence of data collected under the Conservatives and the work of the Environment Agency, they had to do the work themselves to expose the sewage scandal.

Emma Hardy: I wholeheartedly pay tribute to the Ilkley Clean River Group and to the work that my hon. Friend does in championing it in this House.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): I remind my hon. Friend how much this matters to my constituents in East Thanet. We are surrounded on three sides by the sea, yet we manage to clean up our water. However, I was struck by the fact that the Reform manifesto did not contain one word about water pollution or safety. I also want to point out the emptiness of the Opposition Benches in this debate. That should be put on the record.

Emma Hardy: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I would have thought that this would be an important issue for all political parties.

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): Residents in Grosmont in my constituency have had a van parked in the street processing raw sewage, with a pipe left open in the street, for months between the processing of the sewage and the holding tank being emptied. Does my hon. Friend agree that disgusting incidents such as these illustrate our crumbling water infrastructure and the importance of the Bill, which will ringfence funding for vital infrastructure?

Emma Hardy: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. What she is witnessing in the streets of her constituency is a perfect example of the crumbling infrastructure that we have inherited.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Emma Hardy: Let me try to get through my remarks.

If it becomes feasible in future for companies to install monitors more quickly, they will be encouraged to do so. In addition to reporting requirements for emergency overflows, other measures in this Bill will ensure that water companies have robust plans to reduce pollution incidents and empower the regulator to punish wrongdoing effectively. This includes requirements to produce pollution incident reduction plans and implementation reports, as set out in clause 2 of the Bill, and requirements for water companies to consider the use of nature-based solutions in the production of their drainage and wastewater managements plans, as set out in clause 4.

The transparency provided by these measures will drive a culture change ensuring that water companies have the right incentives to reduce discharges of sewage into our precious rivers, lakes and seas. Let me be clear that the Bill also provides comprehensive powers for Ofwat to enforce the requirements introduced by the Bill to increase transparency, including through use of significant fines. I can reassure the House that where discharges are found to have breached permit conditions, the regulator will not hesitate to take action. In relation to new clause 14, I also make it clear that Ofwat has a duty to secure that companies are able to finance the delivery of their statutory obligations, including meeting pollution targets.

The Government are committed to acting as fast as possible to reduce sewage pollution in our waterways, and already have stretching pollution targets in place, informed by detailed analysis and extensive engagement. These targets will drive £60 billion of investment between 2025 and 2050, and almost £12 billion of that investment will begin this year, improving 2,800 storm overflows by 2030. I hope this reassures the House that, where water companies do not comply with requirements around pollution incidents and the reporting of those pollution incidents, the regulator will not hesitate to take action.

Pippa Heylings: The water restoration fund was created by the previous Government, yet not one penny of the £11 million levied on water companies between 2022 and 2023 reached any restoration of the waterways. Does the Minister agree that our precious chalk streams could be helped by the water restoration fund being continued?

Emma Hardy: As I have mentioned, I am a huge fan of our chalk streams. The hon. Member is right to point out that the much-lauded water restoration fund that some Members are so keen to talk about was established in November 2022, yet 18 months later the grand total of the number of projects supported by it was zero.

A number of hon. Members have also put forward suggestions to improve information and data sharing more broadly. The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) has put her name to some of these amendments. Although the Government do not think it necessary to bring forward legislation in this space, we are actively considering ways of making data more accessible to the public through non-legislative means. This includes information on water companies' performance and data on local sewer networks in map form, which must be made available free of charge under the Water Industry Act 1991.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Emma Hardy: This is going to be my last one.

Matt Rodda: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Her comments on this point will be welcomed by many of our local residents. Will she provide further information about the greater powers for Ofwat?

Emma Hardy: This Bill will, of course, empower Ofwat to take necessary action where it finds wrongdoing, including through changes to remuneration under clause 1. I know my hon. Friend cares a lot about this.

Several hon. Members rose—

Emma Hardy: I am sorry, but I will have to stop taking interventions if I am to respond to all the amendments.

Water UK has published a centralised map on its website of discharge data from all storm overflows operated by English water companies. I genuinely found it clear and useful, so I encourage all hon. Members to have a look.

I have heard calls from across the House for reforming the planning frameworks, the regulators and the incentives that govern the water industry model. Although I understand and, believe me, fully share hon. Members' frustrations with the performance across the water sector, the fundamental issues facing the water industry and the regulatory framework in which it operates can no longer be addressed in a piecemeal way. I have spoken at great length throughout the Bill's passage about the independent commission led by Sir Jon Cunliffe, which will make recommendations to fundamentally transform how our water system works.

The broad-ranging commission is bringing together a wide range of expertise to make recommendations in line with eight objectives to deliver the necessary reset to ensure a resilient, innovative and sustainable water sector in England and Wales. It will report to the Government by summer 2025. This includes specific objectives to review the roles, structures, duties and powers of the regulators, the planning frameworks—including the price review process—and the resilience of water companies. That includes financial resilience, which I know matters to many hon. Members.

Points have been raised about taking water companies into public ownership, and the Government have repeatedly made it clear that we do not consider nationalisation to be within the commission's scope. Nationalisation would cost over £90 billion, and it would take years to unpick the current ownership model, at the expense of delivering and addressing more immediate public priorities. However, the commission will consider alternative water industry models within its scope. I take this opportunity to invite all hon. Members to put forward their views to the commission through the upcoming call for evidence, which will be launching soon.

Dr Hudson: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. I suspect that the Government do not agree with our water restoration fund, but if the Cunliffe review says that the water restoration fund should be reinstated, will the Minister commit to doing so?

Emma Hardy: Despite our political differences, the hon. Gentleman and I had a very interesting and—what is the right word?—comradely debate in Committee.

As we explained in Committee, conversations on the water restoration fund are still ongoing. I honestly do not believe that primary legislation is needed, which Conservative Front Benchers know, as they established the fund without primary legislation. I gently point out, as I have already mentioned, that within the 18 months of its establishment under the previous Government, the fund did absolutely nothing.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): Will the Minister give way?

Emma Hardy: I have two minutes remaining, so I have to skip through as much as I can, as I know Members will want me to answer questions, particularly on the SAR.

Some hon. Members have expressed concern about the rules on performance-related pay and consumer representation. Although the Government agree it is crucial that consumers' voices are heard and considered in water company decision making, we have already taken action on this. It is not necessary to require environmental experts to be placed on company boards because, following the agreement made with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in his first week in office, nine of the 16 companies have updated their articles of association to include a social and environmental commitment. DEFRA is working with all of them to ensure they do the rest as soon as possible.

I agree with the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) about the representation of environmental non-governmental organisations on company boards. Members of water company boards are subject to a number of duties under the Companies Act 2006, including a duty to promote the success of that company. A director's fiduciary duties may conflict with the organisational objectives of the environmental group in question, thus preventing their objective participation in board membership. We cannot have a situation in which an environmentalist on a water company board is not comfortable with their duty to promote the success of that company.

I produced a factsheet detailing how the SAR is used to ensure the continued provision of vital public services. However, I remind the House of the facts. I am being very clear: the shortfall recovery power can only be used to recover shortfalls in repaying Government funding. For the last time, I hope, it cannot and would never be used to recover financial creditor or shareholder losses relating to investment in the company. If the amendments were accepted as proposed, it would involve a radical change to insolvency policy, which has been a long-established practice since 1986.

Question put and agreed to.

New clause 18 accordingly read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

6 pm

Proceedings interrupted (Programme Order, 16 December 2024).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83E).

New Clause 16

ESTABLISHMENT OF WATER RESTORATION FUND

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within 60 days of the passing of this Act, make provision for the establishment, operation and management of a Water Restoration Fund.

(2) A Water Restoration Fund is a fund—

- (a) into which any monetary penalties imposed on water companies for specified offences must be paid, and
- (b) out of which payments must be made for expenditure on measures—
 - (i) to help water bodies, including chalk streams, achieve good ecological status, and improve ecological potential and chemical status;
 - (ii) to prevent further deterioration of the ecological status, ecological potential or chemical status of water bodies, including chalk streams;
 - (iii) to enable water-dependent habitats to return to, or remain at, favourable condition;

- (iv) to restore other water-dependent habitats and species, especially where action supports restoration of associated protected sites or water bodies.

(3) The Secretary of State must, by regulations, list the specified offences for the purposes of this section, which must include—

- (a) any relevant provisions of the Water Resources Act 1991, including—
- (i) section 24(4) (unlicensed abstraction or related works or contravening abstraction licence);
 - (ii) section 25(2) (unlicensed impounding works or contravening impounding licence);
 - (iii) section 25C(1) (contravening abstraction or impounding enforcement notice);
 - (iv) section 80 (contravening drought order or permit);
 - (v) section 201(3) (contravening water resources information notice);
- (b) any relevant regulations under section 2 of the Pollution Prevention and Control Act 1999 (regulation of polluting activities etc) related to water pollution;
- (c) regulations under section 61 of the Water Act 2014 (regulation of water resources etc).

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

(5) The provisions in this section replace any existing provision for the sums received for specified offences, including in section 22A(9) of the Water Industry Act 1991 (penalties).”—(*Victoria Atkins.*)

Brought up.

Question put, That the clause be added to the Bill.

The House divided: Ayes 181, Noes 322.

Division No. 93]

[6 pm

AYES

| | |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Adam, Shockat | Corbyn, rh Jeremy |
| Allister, Jim | Coutinho, rh Claire (<i>Proxy</i> |
| Amos, Gideon | <i>vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>) |
| Anderson, Lee | Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey |
| Anderson, Stuart (<i>Proxy vote</i> | Cross, Harriet |
| <i>cast by Mr Mohindra</i>) | Darling, Steve |
| Aquarone, Steff | Davey, rh Ed |
| Argar, rh Edward | Davies, Ann |
| Atkins, rh Victoria | Davies, Gareth |
| Babarinde, Josh | Davies, Mims |
| Bacon, Gareth | Dean, Bobby |
| Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi | Denyer, Carla |
| Baldwin, Dame Harriett | Dewhurst, Charlie |
| Bedford, Mr Peter | Dillon, Mr Lee |
| Bennett, Alison | Dinenage, Dame Caroline |
| Berry, Siân | Dowden, rh Sir Oliver |
| Bhatti, Saqib | Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain |
| Blackman, Bob | Easton, Alex |
| Bool, Sarah | Evans, Dr Luke |
| Bowie, Andrew | Farron, Tim |
| Brandreth, Apha | Foord, Richard |
| Brewer, Alex | Forster, Mr Will |
| Brown-Fuller, Jess | Fortune, Peter |
| Burghart, Alex | Fox, Sir Ashley |
| Campbell, Mr Gregory | Francois, rh Mr Mark |
| Cane, Charlotte | Franklin, Zöe |
| Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair | Freeman, George |
| Cartlidge, James | French, Mr Louie |
| Chadwick, David | Fuller, Richard |
| Chambers, Dr Danny | Gale, rh Sir Roger |
| Cleverly, rh Mr James | Garnier, Mark |
| Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey | George, Andrew |
| Cocking, Lewis | Gibson, Sarah (<i>Proxy vote</i> |
| Coghlan, Chris | <i>cast by Anna Sabine</i>) |
| Collins, Victoria | Glen, rh John |
| Cooper, Daisy | Glover, Olly |

Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Grant, Helen
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison (*Proxy vote*
cast by Mr Mohindra)
 Harding, Monica
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hunt, rh Jeremy
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jones, Clive
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast*
by Joy Morrissey)
 Khan, Ayoub
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kruger, Danny
 Lake, Ben
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Lopez, Julia
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayhew, Jerome
 McMurdock, James
 McVey, rh Esther
 Medi, Llinos
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrison, Mr Tom (*Proxy vote*
cast by Mr Forster)
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Munt, Tessa

Murray, Susan
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 Olney, Sarah
 Paul, Rebecca
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast*
by Mr Mohindra)
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rankin, Jack
 Reed, David
 Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Roome, Ian
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Snowden, Mr Andrew
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Patrick
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron
 Tice, Richard
 Timothy, Nick
 Trott, rh Laura
 Vickers, Matt
 Voaden, Caroline
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Paul Holmes and
 Gregory Stafford

NOES

| | |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy</i> | Amesbury, Mike (<i>Proxy vote</i> |
| <i>vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-</i> | <i>cast by Chris Elmore</i>) |
| <i>Addy</i>) | Anderson, Callum |
| Abbott, Jack | Anderson, Fleur |
| Abrahams, Debbie | Antoniazzi, Tonia |
| Alaba, Mr Bayo | Arthur, Dr Scott |
| Alexander, rh Heidi | Asato, Jess |
| Al-Hassan, Sadik | Athwal, Jas |
| Ali, Rushanara | Atkinson, Catherine |

| | | | |
|--|---|---|--------------------------|
| Atkinson, Lewis | Dixon, Samantha | Kendall, rh Liz | Pinto-Duschinsky, David |
| Bailey, Mr Calvin | Dodds, rh Anneliese | Khan, Naushabah | Pitcher, Lee |
| Bailey, Olivia | Dollimore, Helena | Kinnock, Stephen | Platt, Jo |
| Baines, David | Dowd, Peter | Kirkham, Jayne | Pollard, Luke |
| Baker, Alex | Downie, Graeme | Kitchen, Gen | Powell, Joe |
| Ballinger, Alex | Duncan-Jordan, Neil | Kyrke-Smith, Laura | Powell, rh Lucy |
| Bance, Antonia | Eagle, Dame Angela | Lamb, Peter | Poynton, Gregor |
| Barker, Paula | Edwards, Lauren | Lavery, Ian | Prinsley, Peter |
| Barron, Lee | Efford, Clive | Law, Noah | Quigley, Mr Richard |
| Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex | Egan, Damien | Leadbeater, Kim | Qureshi, Yasmin |
| Baxter, Johanna | Ellis, Maya | Leishman, Brian | Race, Steve |
| Beales, Danny | Elmore, Chris | Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma | Rand, Mr Connor |
| Beavers, Lorraine | Entwistle, Kirith | Lewin, Andrew | Ranger, Andrew |
| Begum, Apsana | Eshalomi, Florence | Lewis, Clive | Reed, rh Steve |
| Bell, Torsten | Esterson, Bill | Lightwood, Simon | Reynolds, Emma |
| Benn, rh Hilary | Evans, Chris | Long Bailey, Rebecca | Rhodes, Martin |
| Betts, Mr Clive | Fenton-Glynn, Josh | MacAlister, Josh | Ribeiro-Addy, Bell |
| Bishop, Matt | Ferguson, Patricia | Macdonald, Alice | Richards, Jake |
| Blake, Olivia | Footy, Emma | MacNae, Andy | Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny |
| Blake, Rachel | Fookes, Catherine | Madders, Justin | Rimmer, Ms Marie |
| Bloore, Chris | Foster, Mr Paul | Martin, Amanda | Roca, Tim |
| Blundell, Mrs Elsie (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>) | Foxcroft, Vicky | Maskell, Rachael | Rodda, Matt |
| Botterill, Jade | Francis, Daniel | Mather, Keir | Russell, Mrs Sarah |
| Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena | Frith, Mr James | Mayer, Alex | Rutland, Tom |
| Brash, Mr Jonathan | Furniss, Gill | McAllister, Douglas | Ryan, Oliver |
| Brickell, Phil | Gardiner, Barry | McCluskey, Martin | Sackman, Sarah |
| Buckley, Julia | Gardner, Dr Allison | McDonagh, Dame Siobhain | Sandher, Dr Jeevun |
| Burgon, Richard | Gelder, Anna | McDonald, Andy | Sewards, Mark |
| Burke, Maureen | Gemmell, Alan | McDonald, Chris | Shah, Naz |
| Burton-Sampson, David | Gilbert, Tracy | McDonnell, rh John | Shanker, Baggy |
| Butler, Dawn | Gill, Preet Kaur | McDougall, Blair | Shanks, Michael |
| Byrne, Ian | Gittins, Becky | McEvoy, Lola | Siddiq, Tulip |
| Cadbury, Ruth | Glindon, Mary | McIntyre, Alex | Simons, Josh |
| Caliskan, Nesil | Goldsborough, Ben | McKee, Gordon | Slaughter, Andy |
| Campbell, rh Sir Alan | Greenwood, Lilian | McKinnell, Catherine | Slinger, John |
| Campbell, Irene | Gwynne, Andrew | McMahon, Jim | Smith, Cat |
| Campbell, Juliet | Haigh, rh Louise | McNally, Frank | Smith, David |
| Campbell-Savours, Markus | Hall, Sarah | Midgley, Anneliese | Smith, Jeff |
| Carden, Dan | Hamilton, Paulette | Minns, Ms Julie | Smith, Nick |
| Carling, Sam | Hardy, Emma | Mishra, Navendu | Smith, Sarah |
| Carns, Al | Harris, Carolyn | Mohamed, Abtisam | Smyth, Karin |
| Champion, Sarah | Hatton, Lloyd | Morden, Jessica | Snell, Gareth |
| Charalambous, Bambos | Hayes, Helen | Morgan, Stephen | Sobel, Alex |
| Charters, Mr Luke | Hayes, Tom | Morris, Grahame | Stainbank, Euan |
| Coleman, Ben | Hazelgrove, Claire | Morris, Joe | Stevens, rh Jo |
| Collier, Jacob | Hillier, Dame Meg | Mullane, Margaret | Stevenson, Kenneth |
| Collinge, Lizzi | Hinchliff, Chris | Murphy, Luke | Stone, Will |
| Collins, Tom | Hinder, Jonathan | Murray, Chris | Strathern, Alistair |
| Conlon, Liam | Hodgson, Mrs Sharon | Murray, James | Strickland, Alan |
| Coombes, Sarah | Hopkins, Rachel | Myer, Luke | Stringer, Graham |
| Cooper, Andrew | Hughes, Claire | Naish, James | Sullivan, Dr Lauren |
| Cooper, Dr Beccy | Hume, Alison | Naismith, Connor | Sultana, Zarah |
| Cooper, rh Yvette | Hurley, Patrick | Narayan, Kanishka | Swallow, Peter |
| Costigan, Deirdre | Hussain, Imran | Nash, Pamela (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>) | Tami, rh Mark |
| Cox, Pam | Irons, Natasha | Newbury, Josh | Tapp, Mike |
| Craft, Jen | Jameson, Sally | Niblett, Samantha | Taylor, David |
| Creagh, Mary | Jarvis, Dan | Nichols, Charlotte | Taylor, Rachel |
| Creasy, Ms Stella | Jermey, Terry | Onn, Melanie | Thomas, Fred |
| Curtis, Chris | Jogee, Adam | Onwurah, Chi | Thomas, Gareth |
| Daby, Janet | Johnson, rh Dame Diana | Opher, Dr Simon | Thompson, Adam |
| Dakin, Sir Nicholas | Johnson, Kim | Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena | Thornberry, rh Emily |
| Dalton, Ashley | Jones, rh Darren | Osborne, Tristan | Tidball, Dr Marie |
| Darlington, Emily | Jones, Lillian | Owatemi, Taiwo | Timms, rh Sir Stephen |
| Davies, Jonathan | Jones, Louise | Owen, Sarah | Toale, Jessica |
| Davies, Paul | Jones, Ruth | Paffey, Darren | Tomlinson, Dan |
| De Cordova, Marsha | Jones, Sarah | Patrick, Matthew | Trickett, Jon |
| Dean, Josh | Josan, Gurinder Singh | Payne, Michael | Tufnell, Henry |
| Dearden, Kate | Joseph, Sojan | Peacock, Stephanie | Turley, Anna |
| Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh | Juss, Warinder | Pearce, Jon | Turmaine, Matt |
| Dickson, Jim | Kane, Chris | Pennycook, Matthew | Turner, Karl |
| Dixon, Anna | Kaur, Satvir (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>) | Perkins, Mr Toby | Turner, Laurence |
| | | | Twigg, Derek |

Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
Western, Andrew
Wheeler, Michael

Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Williams, David
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Noes:
Gerald Jones and
Anna McMorrin

Question accordingly negated.

New Clause 19

CIVIL PENALTIES: EQUIVALENT REDUCTION TO CUSTOMER BILLS

“(1) The Secretary of State must make provision for any monetary penalties imposed on a water company to result in equivalent reductions to the amounts charged to customers by the relevant water company.

(2) In fulfilling its duties under subsection (1), the Secretary of State must arrange, annually—

- (a) for the total amount of monetary penalties imposed on a water company in the previous year to be calculated;
- (b) for that total to be divided by the number of customers of the water company;
- (c) for each customer’s next bill from the water company to be reduced by that figure.

(3) Any reduction applied under this section must be indicated on a customer’s statement of account.

(4) In this section, ‘water company’ has the meaning given by section 6(5).”—(*Victoria Atkins.*)

This new clause would provide for any fines imposed on water companies to result in equivalent reductions to customers’ bills.

Brought up.

Question put, That the clause be added to the Bill.

The House divided: Ayes 180, Noes 325.

Division No. 94]

[6.15 pm

AYES

Adam, Shockat
Allister, Jim
Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
Aquarone, Steff
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, rh Victoria
Babarinde, Josh
Bacon, Gareth
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bennett, Alison
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew
Brandreth, Aphra
Brewer, Alex
Brown-Fuller, Jess

Burghart, Alex
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cane, Charlotte
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Cartlidge, James
Chadwick, David
Chambers, Dr Danny
Cleverly, rh Mr James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Coghlan, Chris
Collins, Victoria
Cooper, Daisy
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Cross, Harriet
Darling, Steve
Davey, rh Ed
Davies, Ann
Davies, Gareth

Davies, Mims
Dean, Bobby
Dewhurst, Charlie
Dillon, Mr Lee
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Easton, Alex
Evans, Dr Luke
Farron, Tim
Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
Fortune, Peter
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Franklin, Zöe
Freeman, George
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
George, Andrew
Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
Gilmour, Rachel
Glen, rh John
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Grant, Helen
Green, Sarah
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
Harding, Monica
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heylings, Pippa
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hobhouse, Wera
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hunt, rh Jeremy
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Liz
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jones, Clive
Jopp, Lincoln
Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
Khan, Ayoub
Kohler, Mr Paul
Kruger, Danny
Lake, Ben
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Lopez, Julia
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Helen
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mathew, Brian
Mayhew, Jerome
McMurdock, James
McVey, rh Esther
Medi, Llinos
van Mierlo, Freddie
Miller, Calum
Milne, John

Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
Mohamed, Iqbal
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Moran, Layla
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster*)
Morrisey, Joy
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David
Munt, Tessa
Murray, Susan
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
Olney, Sarah
Paul, Rebecca
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pritchard, rh Mark
Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
Rankin, Jack
Reed, David
Robertson, Joe
Robinson, rh Gavin
Roome, Ian
Rosindell, Andrew
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Patrick
Stephenson, Blake
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Swann, Robin
Wayne, rh Sir Desmond
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Bradley
Thomas, Cameron
Tice, Richard
Timothy, Nick
Trott, rh Laura
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vickers, Matt
Voaden, Caroline
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wild, James
Wilkinson, Max
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:
Paul Holmes and
Gregory Stafford

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Alexander, rh Heidi
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Amesbury, Mike (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baines, David
 Baker, Alex
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Bishop, Matt
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew

Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Edwards, Lauren
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McNally, Frank
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke

Murray, Chris
 Murray, James
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reynolds, Emma
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stone, Will

Strathern, Alistair
Strickland, Alan
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Sultana, Zarah
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, David
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thompson, Adam
Thornberry, rh Emily
Tidball, Dr Marie
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry
Turley, Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Laurence
Twigg, Derek

Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
Western, Andrew
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Williams, David
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Noes:

Gerald Jones and
Anna McMorris

Harding, Monica
Heylings, Pippa
Hobhouse, Wera
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Liz
Jones, Clive
Khan, Ayoub
Kohler, Mr Paul
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Helen
Mathew, Brian
van Mierlo, Freddie
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Mohamed, Iqbal
Moran, Layla
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom (*Proxy vote
cast by Mr Forster*)
Murray, Susan

Olney, Sarah
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Ramsay, Adrian
Robinson, rh Gavin
Roome, Ian
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Shannon, Jim
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Sollom, Ian
Swann, Robin
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Cameron
Voaden, Caroline
Wilkinson, Max
Wilson, Munira
Wilson, rh Sammy
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:

Tessa Munt and
Bobby Dean

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 10

CHANGES IN RESPECT OF ENVIRONMENT AGENCY AND NRBW FUNCTIONS

Amendment made: 4, page 14, leave out lines 35 and 36 and insert—

“(a) sections 205A and 205B of the Water Industry Act 1991 (pollution incident reduction plans and implementation reports).”—(*Emma Hardy.*)

This amendment updates clause 10 to reflect amendments made to clause 2 in the Lords.

Clause 12

MODIFICATION BY SECRETARY OF STATE OF WATER COMPANY’S APPOINTMENT CONDITIONS ETC TO RECOVER LOSSES

Amendment proposed: 9, page 15, line 34, leave out from “to” to “such” in line 36 and insert “recover from its creditors”.—(*Tim Farron.*)

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 73, Noes 321.

Division No. 95]

[6.29 pm

AYES

Adam, Shockat
Allister, Jim
Amos, Gideon
Aquarone, Steff
Babarinde, Josh
Bennett, Alison
Berry, Siân
Brewer, Alex
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cane, Charlotte
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chadwick, David
Chambers, Dr Danny
Coghlan, Chris
Collins, Victoria
Cooper, Daisy

Darling, Steve
Davey, rh Ed
Denyer, Carla
Dillon, Mr Lee
Easton, Alex
Farron, Tim
Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
Franklin, Zöe
George, Andrew
Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote
cast by Anna Sabine*)
Gilmour, Rachel
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Green, Sarah

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy
vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-
Addy*)

Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Amesbury, Mike (*Proxy vote
cast by Chris Elmore*)
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Alex
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Begum, Apsana
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Bishop, Matt
Blake, Olivia
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote
cast by Chris Elmore*)
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brickell, Phil
Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard

NOES

Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carden, Dan
Carling, Sam
Carns, Al
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Cooper, rh Yvette
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creasy, Ms Stella
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Dalton, Ashley
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
De Cordova, Marsha
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Dowd, Peter

Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Edwards, Lauren
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirth
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jarvis, Dan
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne

Kitchen, Gen
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McNally, Frank
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, James
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Onn, Melanie
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo

Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reynolds, Emma
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham

Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Western, Andrew
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Noes:
 Anna McMorrin and
 Gerald Jones

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 15

EXTENT, COMMENCEMENT, TRANSITIONAL PROVISION
 AND SHORT TITLE

Amendments made: 5, page 21, line 6, at end insert—

“(aa) section 1 (rules about remuneration and governance);”.

This amendment brings clause 1 into force on Royal Assent.

Amendment 6, page 21, line 16, leave out paragraph (a).

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 5.

Amendment 7, page 21, line 30, leave out paragraph (a).

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 5.

Amendment 8, page 22, line 1, at end insert—

“(aa) section (*Special provision in charges schemes*);”—
 (*Emma Hardy.*)

This amendment brings NC18 into force two months after Royal Assent.

Third Reading

6.43 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Our rivers, lakes and seas are awash with pollution. The legacy of 14 years of Conservative failure is the highest level of sewage spills on record, economic growth held back by a lack of water supplies and, now, painful bill rises to fix the problems that they left behind. The British public are rightly angry about the state of our waterways. It has been left to this Government to clean up the mess once and for all. The water sector needs a complete reset, reform that puts customers and the environment first, and a new partnership with the Government to invest for the future and upgrade our broken infrastructure. This Government have a three-stage plan to make that happen.

During my first week in post, I met water company chief executives and announced immediate steps to improve the performance of the water industry, including ringfencing money for investment in water infrastructure so that it can never again be diverted to bonuses or dividends, and ensuring that customers who face frequent water outages or contaminated tap water receive more generous and faster compensation.

This evening, I am delighted to open the Third Reading debate on the Bill. Its core provisions will strengthen the powers of the regulators so that they can better hold water companies to account for poor performance. It will give Ofwat new powers to ban undeserved bonuses when water company executives fail to meet the high standards the public rightly demand. It will introduce stricter penalties, including imprisonment where senior executives of water companies obstruct investigations by environmental regulators, and includes provisions for automatic and severe fines for wrongdoing. We have also extended powers so that environmental regulators can recover costs for a wider range of future enforcement measures—the polluter, not the public, will pay. We have also introduced mandatory monitoring of emergency overflows and pollution incidents so the public can hold companies to account.

The Bill has been strengthened and improved in its passage through both Houses. I am thankful to all hon. Members, and all noble Lords in the other place, for their thorough consideration and scrutiny of the Bill, and for the many and varied amendments that have been tabled and debated. Water companies will now be required to include water supply as well as sewage-related incidents in pollution incident reduction plans, and we have created personal liability for chief executives so that there is accountability for these plans at the very highest level. Water companies will also need to produce an implementation report alongside their annual plans so the public can see what action they are taking to reduce pollution incidents.

We have introduced two clauses to consider more nature-based solutions such as reed beds and wetlands in drainage and wastewater management plans, and for Ofwat to track progress against our environmental targets. A further clause will ensure that measures are in place to support vulnerable customers, as set out by the water Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), earlier this evening.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): Will the Secretary join me in commending the citizen scientists and local campaign groups that have driven many of these issues right up the political agenda, including the Friends of the River Exe in Exeter? I am delighted that this Government have acted so quickly to hold the water companies to account for the sewage crisis. Does he agree both that this is long overdue, and that it will fundamentally change the way our rivers are treated?

Steve Reed: I echo my hon. Friend's commendation for the citizen scientists and the work they have done to highlight the scale of the problem.

The support for the Bill across the House and among the public demonstrates our collective desire to clean up our rivers, lakes and seas. I am proud of the progress we have made through the Bill, but it is not the extent of our ambition.

In October, I announced the biggest review of the water sector in a generation. Sir Jon Cunliffe has appointed an expert advisory group with leading voices representing the environment sector, public health, engineering, customers, investors and economists, and is preparing to launch a public call for evidence within weeks.

Tim Farron: The Secretary of State talks about Sir Jon Cunliffe's water commission, and we are obviously interested in engaging with that. Does he think, though, that today's appointment of a former Thames Water executive to the commission will fill the public with confidence that it will be independent in any way?

Steve Reed: Of course, it is an independent commission; it is up to Sir Jon to appoint to the board whom he likes. However, it is a very balanced board, and I hope the hon. Gentleman will recognise that voices from many stakeholder groups are represented, as indeed they should be.

The commission will report to the UK and Welsh Governments this summer, after which both Governments will respond and consult on Sir Jon's recommendations, including on further legislation.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): The Secretary of State is right that things are getting better. In my constituency, two new investments in water sector upgrades, by Wessex Water and Pennon, are worth a total of £230 million. Clearly, much more has to be done, but will he join me in welcoming those new investments? Does he recognise that such investment is not consistent across the country, which is exactly why we need the Bill?

Steve Reed: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and I welcome those investments. From visiting him in his constituency, I know what a champion he is for cleaning up the water and the beaches in Bournemouth.

I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice and the noble Lady, Baroness Hayman of Ullock for their expert leadership of the Bill through Parliament, and members of staff in the Bill team and in DEFRA for their hard work and professionalism. I thank Members on all sides who participated in the debates at all stages. I extend my thanks to our colleagues in the Welsh Government and the Senedd for working collaboratively with the UK Government on the Bill. I am delighted that, at the Welsh Government's own request, the benefits brought about by the Bill will extend to Wales.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): Consumers listening to this debate have been concerned about the role of Ofwat. What reassurance can the Secretary of State give them that Ofwat, the regulator, will put consumers' interests and environmental interests before corporations' interests?

Steve Reed: Sir Jon Cunliffe's commission will be reviewing precisely those points, and I hope the hon. Gentleman will take the opportunity to contribute his views when the call for evidence begins in just a few weeks.

The changes the Government have made in a short amount of time show that with collective determination and ambition we can turn the water sector around. The failures of the past are ending. The future of the water sector is full of promise. Our waterways have been poisoned by unacceptable levels of sewage and other pollution for too long. With these changes, finally, we will clean up our rivers, lakes and seas for good.

6.52 pm

Victoria Atkins: I thank everyone who has scrutinised and worked on the Bill in both Houses, including the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson), our very efficient Whip, my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew), and the noble Lord Roborough, who led very constructive discussions in the other place. It is a shame that the Government rejected the amendments put forward today. I thank the Doorkeepers, the hon. Members who chaired the Committee and everyone who helped His Majesty's official Opposition to scrutinise the Bill.

Across the House, we can all agree that there are fundamental problems facing the water and sewerage industry. Since 2010, the number of designated bathing waters has increased; we have seen a significant improvement in water quality ratings, with more water rated as excellent or good; and an increase in blue flag beaches. But of course we want to see more. We were, in fact, the first Government in history to set out that storm overflows must be reduced, and our landmark Environment Act 2021 gave stronger powers to regulators and imposed strict demands for tackling pollution. We set legally binding targets to improve water quality and availability, and to reduce nutrient pollution. We rolled out catchment-sensitive farming to all farms in England. We stepped up the requirements for investment, including investment from water companies and storm overflow improvements, and nationally significant infrastructure projects such as the Thames tideway tunnel super sewer. When we came into government, just 7% of storm overflows were monitored. When we left government, we had increased that to 100%.

We support the Bill, but we do so with some disappointment at its lack of ambition. Frankly, as we have said before, much of what the Bill tries to do, including monitoring, blocking bonuses and fines, was brought in by the Conservatives in government. We say that the primary legislation is not necessary, but we will of course support the Bill.

I am especially disappointed that the Government have declined to accept our amendments. In particular, it is woeful that they have failed to put the water restoration fund into legislation. *[Interruption.]* I will deal with the Minister's comments in a moment. The

public rightly want to see the Government addressing water quality, but rather water company fines being used to restore water bodies, that money will be going into the gaping hole of the Treasury's coffers, presumably in an attempt to undo some of the damage caused by the Chancellor's disastrous growth-blocking, tax-hiking, job-cutting, investment-plummeting Budget.

Now I am going to correct the Minister, and I will do so from the Dispatch Box rather than through a point of order. Last summer it emerged that Thames Water, Yorkshire Water and Northumbrian Water would be fined a record £160 million between them for a "catalogue of failure" over illegal sewage discharges, subject to consultation. However, in August—when this Government were in power—the Treasury held back those fines, which were due to go into the water restoration fund to help clean up affected areas. The Minister gave figures earlier, but it is her Government's fault that money was not paid into that fund. We on the side of the House believe that the polluters should pay for their mistakes, rather than their fines paying for pay rises for the Government's trade union buddies. *[Interruption.]* Yes, I am sure that the train drivers are very grateful.

Tom Hayes: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Victoria Atkins: I will give way, with great interest.

Tom Hayes: I sat on the Public Bill Committee, and I must say that the tone that the right hon. Lady is striking is very different from that of her colleagues on the Committee. I just wonder whether she has any regrets about her Government's record on tackling sewage or pollution. Would she acknowledge any regrets?

Victoria Atkins: I do love being mansplained to by Labour Back Benchers. I suppose it is part of the Labour party's women problem. The hon. Gentleman is now throwing his thumbs up at me—goodness me!

What I will say is that throughout the passage of the Bill, we have said, "We have made some progress, but there is more to do." That is precisely why we are supporting the Bill tonight, although we will try to improve it and strengthen it.

Tim Farron: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Victoria Atkins: I will not, because I want to allow others to speak.

The Government have also sadly failed to recognise the importance of chalk streams, refusing to confirm the continuation of protections put in place by us Conservatives. I am afraid that warm words about rainforests, much as we agree with them, will not protect these vital habitats. We want to see improved water quality, and I urge the Government to take stock and seek to adopt a more rounded approach that cleans up our rivers and seas, treats bill payers and taxpayers properly, and builds on our work to construct the water systems of the future.

6.57 pm

Tim Farron: Let me say, without going through all the flowery stuff that we did earlier, that I am grateful to Members in all parts of the House for what has been a broadly collegiate debate. However, the shadow Secretary

of State said something that is worth reflecting on. I think she was talking about what I am about to mention, namely the fines of £164 million that Ofwat had indeed proposed should be levied against the very three water companies to which she referred. For what it is worth—and I am not here to defend the Treasury—this was not a Treasury decision at all. It was because of Ofwat's weakness, and a culture of timidity that is evident when it comes to gathering money from the water companies, that the money was not collected. That information is 100% correct, because it was given to me in response to one of my Freedom of Information Act requests.

In any event, the key feature is my disappointment in the Bill. I will certainly support it should it come to a vote, and I support it anyway, but its weakness lies in the fact that it is not radical enough. It does not go far enough, and it does not tackle the weakness in regulation to which, in a roundabout, accidental way, the Secretary of State has referred.

We will engage with the Cunliffe water review and recognise it as independent. My reflection is simply this. The Labour party has been in opposition for a long time. They were a well-funded Opposition through short money—we could only dream of such things—and surely had the capability to come up with a set of plans that meant they could get on with it straightaway, rather than kicking it to halfway into the Parliament. This is an unambitious Bill, but it is good enough, and it will have our support.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed, with amendments.

Jerome Mayhew: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I need some assistance in understanding how the House can express its displeasure at the Government's manipulation of the business of the House to stop proper consideration of this Bill. Water was at the heart of the last general election—it is really important to our constituents—and yet the Bill's Report stage was limited to less than one and a half hours, and not a single Back Bencher has been able to contribute on Third Reading. Is there a way that we can express our disapprobation of the Government putting forward two non-urgent statements today on Gaza and on Sudan and the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo—both of them important in their own right but, I suspect, designed to eat up time?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the hon. Member for his prior notice. While that is not a matter for the Chair, his comments are now on the record.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I gently refute what the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) just said? Two important statements were made today. It is for the Chair to decide on urgent questions, of which there were two today, with both running for a considerable time. It was not the Government's intention at all for this debate, which is on a matter of great importance to many people across the House, to be curtailed. I will certainly take on board what he says, and there will potentially be further opportunities with the Bill. *[Interruption.]* There will be statements tomorrow, and there were statements earlier this week; there are lots of important matters.

We take great care to ensure that important Government announcements are made to the House through oral statements, and we are criticised when we do not do that.

Business without Debate

SPEAKER'S ABSENCE

Ordered,

That the Speaker have leave of absence on Thursday 30 January to attend the funeral of the Right honourable the Lord Prescott, formerly Member for Kingston upon Hull East.—(*Lucy Powell.*)

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

ENERGY

That the draft Heat Networks (Market Framework) (Great Britain) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 28 November 2024, be approved.—(*Martin McCluskey.*)

Question agreed to.

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

CLIMATE CHANGE

That the draft Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme (Amendment) Order 2025, which was laid before this House on 3 December 2024, be approved.—(*Martin McCluskey.*)

Question agreed to.

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

RETAINED EU LAW REFORM

That the draft Airports Slot Allocation (Alleviation of Usage Requirements etc.) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 4 December 2024, be approved.—(*Martin McCluskey.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Family farm tax

7.2 pm

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): The removal of agricultural property relief and business property relief on inheritance tax on farms will have a devastating impact on family farms across this country. In Northern Ireland, the family structures of our farms, their size compared with elsewhere in the United Kingdom, the significant price of land and the disparity between the statistics from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs of Northern Ireland on the number of Northern Ireland farms that will be impacted by this change are why the Ulster Farmers' Union petition opposing the removal gathered more than 15,000 signatures. I urge the Government to take note of this petition and ask the Chancellor to meet the farming unions.

The petition states:

"The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government take immediate action to stop the removal of the Agricultural Property Relief and Business Property Relief on inheritance tax on farms.

And the petitioners remain, etc."

[Robin Swann]

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Northern Ireland,

Declares that the government should uphold the Agricultural Property Relief and Business Property Relief on inheritance tax on farms; notes the petition by the Ulster Farmers' Union on this topic with over 15,000 signatures; and further notes the disparity between the DEFRA and DAERA statistics on the number of Northern Ireland farms impacted by this change.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government take immediate action to stop the removal of the Agricultural Property Relief and Business Property Relief on inheritance tax on farms.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003037]

Unionised Workers in the Housing Sector: Pay Discrimination

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Martin McCluskey.*)

7.4 pm

Anneliese Midgley (Knowsley) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for granting this debate. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a member of Unite the Union.

I have spent my life in the trade union movement, so it is no surprise that my first Adjournment debate focuses on the principle of collective bargaining. A dispute in my constituency appears to expose a gap in the legislation, whereby an employer can offer pay increases exclusively to non-unionised workers—an unacceptable practice that can be exploited by employers not just in Knowsley, but across the country.

Livv Housing, the largest housing association in my constituency, manages 13,000 homes across Liverpool and the north-west. In March 2024, Livv reported reserves of £110.6 million. Over the past five years, it has recorded annual surpluses ranging from £14 million to £25 million, yet the workers who keep Livv running have faced years of real-terms pay cuts. Pay has fallen by over 30% in real terms since 2011.

It is no wonder that Unite and Unison members have been taking industrial action since October last year. Livv has refused to engage in meaningful discussions with the unions, but it has also declared the negotiations exhausted. The stonewalling has prolonged the dispute, and it is evident from my inbox that it is having an impact on my constituents who depend on Livv's services. The casework load involving Livv is mounting up, and it is having a bad effect on people's lives. Nothing is getting fixed, because its management will not sit down and settle the dispute.

In December, Livv wrote to all staff to say that they could have a 5% pay rise if they replied in writing to confirm that they were not a member of a trade union. The email says:

"If you are a non-union member and would like to accept the pay award offer of 5%, please can you send confirmation of your acceptance and confirm that you are a non-union member. A one-line email to confirm you wish to receive the pay award and that you are not a union member will be enough."

This practice is completely contrary to the spirit of the Employment Relations Act 2004, which sought to protect workers' collective voice and to stop inducement and similar practices. However, some employers keep trying to find a way around the protections, and we have to put a stop to it.

I have personally written to the chief executive officer of Livv on multiple occasions, urging the housing association to engage constructively with the unions and to seek a fair resolution, but Léann Hearne has gone as far as to inform me that she will no longer engage with me in writing. I have written to Livv and asked it to bring an end to the dispute, as has Mayor Steve Rotherham, and Knowsley council has passed a motion that asks it to get around the table and solve the dispute with the unions. This is all that any of us wants, especially the workers currently in dispute. Instead of doing that, Livv has focused its efforts on undermining collective bargaining.

We all know that workers get the best deal when they collectively bargain for pay and conditions. The strength of workers standing together is the only thing that can balance the power of an employer, which is why bad employers have done everything they can over the years to undermine the ability of workers to collectively bargain.

Some Members of the House will remember the 2021 case of *Kostal UK Ltd v. Dunkley*, in which the employer tried to undermine the collective voice of Unite workers. Before talks had been exhausted, Kostal made a direct offer to the workforce and informed staff that they would not receive their Christmas bonus if they did not accept it by a deadline. Does that sound familiar? Like Livv, Kostal thought it had found a loophole in the law, but that was unanimously rejected by the Supreme Court. In its ruling, Lord Leggatt said:

“Such conduct denies the union its seat at the table and does not allow the union’s voice to be heard.”

Today, Livv Housing is doing just that.

What this behaviour does is create a two-tier workforce, pitting colleagues against each other. Imagine going into a workplace with a culture like that. If some employers can get away with this, you can bet that other employers will follow. It was Winston Churchill who said:

“The trade unions are a long-established and essential part of our national life. We take our stand by these pillars of our British society as it has gradually developed and evolved itself, of the right of individual labouring men to adjust their wages and conditions by collective bargaining, including the right to strike.”

I understand that the Minister cannot comment on individual disputes, but this is clearly something that can be exploited by employers across the country. The Employment Rights Bill provides a clear opportunity to close this loophole that we thought was closed so long ago, so I ask the Minister to commit to looking at amending the Bill to stop employers seeking to undermine collective bargaining by offering non-union members preferential treatment in pay awards, and to update me on those plans.

7.10 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Anneliese Midgley) for securing this debate and for her excellent speech. She has a long and proud record in the trade union movement, which she has brought to the fore today.

I want to start by setting out the Government’s approach to the important subject of industrial relations. We want employers and trade unions to come together to grow our economy. We know that the world of work is fairer and more productive when people can come together to negotiate fair pay and decent conditions. That is why we are resetting industrial relations through the Employment Rights Bill. We are repealing nearly every part of the Trade Union Act 2016, which tried to smother trade unions in form-filling and red tape and prevent them from doing their core job of negotiation and dispute resolution.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for Knowsley (Anneliese Midgley) for bringing forward this debate. I spoke to her beforehand, and I understand what she is trying to do. She has

clearly outlined the case for the unions in her contribution tonight. When I started work for Henry Denny’s in Belfast in my early 20s, they asked me if I wanted to join the union. To be honest, I was not sure, but the guy told me it was compulsory, so I said, “That’s okay.” But here’s the story. I had the union on my side when I first started work at Henry Denny’s; I had it to back me up whenever I needed something. I had had a different opinion about what unions were and what they could do for me. The hon. Lady has outlined what the unions can do, I understand personally what they can do, and I look forward to hearing the Minister tell us what he is going to do.

Justin Madders: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his support for unions. I was a little worried when the debate started because he was not in his normal place. I thought there was going to be some sort of national emergency because the hon. Member for Strangford had not attended the Adjournment debate, but I am glad he is here and that he has spoken very positively about the benefits of joining a trade union.

I shall go back to some of the work we are doing to improve the industrial relations landscape. We are of course repealing the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act 2023, which, to our mind, only increased tensions and failed to prevent a single day of industrial action. We are going further in strengthening the voice of working people by making it easier for trade unions to get recognised, giving them the right of access to workplaces and making sure that they have enough time to represent their members. When the rights of working people are flouted, our new fair work agency will be empowered to investigate. We have recently run a consultation on modernising trade union laws so that they are fit for the modern workplace and the modern economy. That consultation closed on 2 December and we are currently analysing responses. We will publish a Government response to the consultation before Report stage of the Employment Rights Bill.

This is a transformative package that marks a new era for working people and I hope that hon. Members are in no doubt about the Government’s commitment to marking this new way forward. It is a way that brings a new deal for working people, making jobs more secure and family friendly, banning exploitative zero-hours contracts, supporting women in work at every stage in their life, and providing a genuine living wage and sick pay for the lowest earners. There will be further and faster action to close the gender pay gap, to ensure that rights are enforced and that trade unions are strengthened, to repeal anti-worker, anti-union laws, to turn the page on industrial relations and to end fire and rehire, while also giving working people the basic rights that they deserve at work from day one. This is a pro-business, pro-worker, pro-growth Bill from a pro-business, pro-worker, pro-growth Government.

As we know, a range of protections exist for workers against inducements and detriment related to trade union membership or activities. Of those, I will mention three that may be relevant to this particular situation. Section 146 of the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992 protects workers against detriment being imposed by an employer for the sole or main purpose of preventing or deterring the worker from being a trade union member or taking part in union activities, or penalising them for doing so.

[Justin Madders]

Through clause 63 of the Employment Rights Bill, we are enhancing protections against detriment by conferring a right on workers not to be subjected to detriment

“for the sole or main purpose of preventing or deterring the worker from taking protected industrial action, or penalising the worker for doing so.”

Section 145A of the 1992 Act protects workers against offers made by the employer for the sole or main purpose of inducing the worker not to be a trade union member or not to take part in union activities. Finally, section 145B of the 1992 Act protects members of trade unions that are recognised, or are seeking to be recognised, by their employer against offers made by the employer for the sole or main purpose of resulting in workers’ terms and conditions not being determined by a collective agreement negotiated by the union.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley indicated, we cannot comment on the extent to which existing legislation applies to a particular case, as that is ultimately a matter for tribunals and courts to determine. However, I hope it has been helpful to state clearly some of the existing protections that may be relevant.

It is also worth putting it on record that this Government expect employers to work in partnership with unions to resolve disputes through negotiation. We certainly do not believe that pay offers should be framed in a way that requires an individual to confirm that they are not a member of a trade union. At the very least, as my hon. Friend said, that goes against the spirit of good industrial relations.

I recognise that disputes are sometimes difficult to resolve, and I take this opportunity to highlight the important role that ACAS plays in this space. Its remit

is to promote good employment relations, to advise employers and employees on workplace matters, and to resolve individual and collective workplace disputes. Employees and employers in a workplace dispute may wish to contact ACAS to get advice on employment law and workplace relations, and to help resolve their dispute.

Of course, resolving disputes through ACAS requires both parties to participate, and it is disappointing to hear from my hon. Friend that not only will Livv not engage with her on this matter, but it does not appear that it will engage with the trade union either. I hope Livv reconsiders because, through our “make work pay” agenda, we have been clear that it is our intention to ensure that workplace rights are fit for a modern economy, empower working people and deliver economic growth.

That is why we have introduced the Employment Rights Bill, which represents the biggest upgrade to workers’ rights in a generation. We will always listen carefully to any arguments on how the law on inducements or detriment could be improved, and we always welcome views on how we can reset industrial relations to create a modern framework that is fit for a modern economy and modern working practices.

I would welcome the opportunity to hear more information from my hon. Friend about the specifics of this issue, and I urge Livv to engage with her and the trade unions. I am open to looking at the case in more detail to understand what action, if any, is necessary, and I am always happy to work with my hon. Friend to ensure that trade union rights are properly observed in this country.

Question put and agreed to.

7.18 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 28 January 2025

[SIR DESMOND SWAYNE *in the Chair*]

Road Safety: Young Drivers

9.30 am

Sir Desmond Swayne (in the Chair): Before I call Julia Buckley, I wish to make a short statement. I have been advised that she wishes to raise relevant cases that are not currently sub judice but have been subject to a completed police investigation and a coroner inquest. Caution must be exercised by any Member wishing to raise the specifics of relevant cases.

Julia Buckley (Shrewsbury) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered road safety for young drivers.

Thank you for chairing this Westminster Hall debate on road safety for young drivers, Sir Desmond, and for allowing me to present the opening statement to our Minister for the Future of Roads, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood). I thank her for giving up her time today to engage in this discussion.

Road traffic collisions are the biggest killer of young people aged 15 to 29 worldwide. In 2023, 290 young people were killed in the UK as a result of a road collision, and nearly one quarter of all road collisions involved young people. Although drivers under 24 make up only 6% of total licence holders, they represent 18% of all car drivers killed and seriously injured. That is because one in five newly qualified drivers will have an accident in their first year. For any other leading cause of death of our young people, we would declare a public health emergency and prioritise resources to tackle the crisis.

Unfortunately, young people are also more likely to be involved in crashes causing multiple injuries and those that involve a greater number of people. There is much evidence to suggest that younger and less experienced drivers carry a heavier risk. The road safety campaign Brake points to some development-related risks, including the level of brain development, overconfidence and poor assessment of hazards, that make young drivers more prone to serious accidents.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for the way she is laying out her case. Does she agree that preventing young people from speeding is one way to prevent accidents? Like me, she knows that it is very difficult to get fixed speed cameras in place. The current Government guidance says that three serious accidents or deaths must occur before a fixed speed camera can be installed. Does she agree that a preventive approach would be much more successful than a punitive approach?

Julia Buckley: I agree that all measures that can prevent collisions, injuries and deaths should be explored. Prevention is often not only better but cheaper than dealing with the consequences of doing nothing.

Research from the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents has shown that young drivers have poorer visual awareness. They display a smaller range of horizontal scanning of the road, they check their mirrors less, and they focus more on stationary objects than moving objects.

In rural areas such as my constituency of Shrewsbury, the statistics are compounded by the disproportionate danger on countryside roads. According to National Farmers Union Mutual's 2024 "Rural Road Safety" report, there were nearly 1,000 deaths on rural roads that year. Tragically, collisions on rural roads are four times more likely to end in a fatality. That report showed that rural hazards are often entirely different from those on urban roads, and require a specific set of skills and awareness—including the need to look out for livestock or agricultural vehicles, the lack of lighting or road markings, narrow passing points, the lack of visibility, blind corners and poor road quality. It highlighted the need for improved road maintenance and infrastructure.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. Will she join me in congratulating charity groups such as Life After, in my area, which deals with people who have suffered trauma and the loss of partners or close relatives in road traffic accidents? It does so much to help people after the traffic accidents that she is so eloquently talking about. That type of education would help young people.

Julia Buckley: I agree, and it is absolutely excellent to hear of any support for families who have been bereaved as a result of a collision. That can be used to educate others, so that we can try to prevent accidents in the future. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention.

However, a majority of drivers wrongly assume that urban roads are more dangerous. That leads to an underestimation of the risks involved in driving on rural roads. NFU Mutual produced a code for countryside roads to support education and awareness-raising of the specific driving skills that would help. That could be incorporated into the driving test or a follow-up course of additional learning as part of the driver's probationary period.

Many young people who live in rural areas feel isolated and, as a consequence, feel compelled to start driving as early as possible because of the lack of public transport, which leaves them unable to access college work, social or sporting activities. In Shropshire, we have lost more than 5,000 bus routes since 2010 and 17-year-olds are increasingly driving their first car out of necessity—something that would be anathema to a teenager growing up in London or Manchester, where public transport is so easy and cheap to use.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I congratulate my constituency neighbour on securing this critical debate. She is making an excellent case for improving road safety for young people. Does she agree that putting public transport infrastructure in place is critical to giving people options, and to enabling them to have a social life and feel less isolated in rural areas without having to get in the car at a very young and very risky age?

Julia Buckley: I could not agree more, and I think that particularly affects young people living in rural areas. It is not surprising that between 2019 and 2023, nearly half of casualties in young car driver collisions occurred on rural roads. Each of those numbers is a person—a young person with their whole life ahead of them, a son or daughter whose family love and cherish them.

Michelle Scrogham (Barrow and Furness) (Lab): My constituent, Sharron Huddleston, has been campaigning after tragically losing her daughter Caitlin in 2017. She was one of those children on rural roads who tragically lost her life as a passenger in a young novice's car. Sharon founded the Forget-me-not Families Uniting group. They campaign for restrictions on the number of passengers that young drivers can carry in the car, and on night-time driving. What haunts me is the fact that had we listened to people campaigning on this issue more than 40 years ago, Caitlin would still be here today. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is time we looked at this issue seriously and put in place restrictions to protect young drivers and other people on the road?

Julia Buckley: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I think we are going to be hearing lots of suggestions today about all the measures that could help prevent such tragedies, because each death is an avoidable tragedy that freezes these young people in time, forever prevented from growing up to fulfil their full potential.

Harvey Owen, the son of my constituent, was killed in a fatal car crash while travelling from Shrewsbury with three other young men, all of whom were killed in the accident. Four young lives were taken too soon, leaving their families behind with an unbearable void where their child should be.

Crystal Owen, Harvey's mother, has taken that raw pain and channelled her energy into a focused campaign. She is dedicated and selfless in her advocacy of young drivers and their families. It is on behalf of Crystal Owen that I requested today's debate. She is sitting with us here today, surrounded by other families of young people killed in serious car crashes. I thank them all for coming today for what cannot be an easy day. We really appreciate their presence. They have formed the Forget-me-not group to campaign together so that nobody else has to suffer as they have. With Crystal's permission, I will read out the story of Harvey Owen written in her words, because nothing I could say could do justice to her personal tragedy. This is Crystal's story:

"My kind-hearted son Harvey had just turned 17 in November 2023. A couple of weeks later, he asked me if he could go to Wales with two friends he had known since school. It was to be his first weekend away with friends, and as a parent, I felt it was time to give him a little freedom. He and his friends planned to stay at one of their grandparents' houses, and when I heard this, I thought, 'What harm can come to him?' It was a trusted friend's family, in a safe place. It felt like the right thing to do, to let him experience a bit more independence. At this age, you need to give them a little freedom, right? So, I agreed.

After seeing a video of one of the parents confirming where they were staying, I had no reason to doubt Harvey's story about who was driving. We had always known Harvey's friends. Our home was often where the boys would gather to play music for many years. As far as we knew he had no friends who had even passed their driving tests, so we felt comfortable with the situation. Harvey seemed so grown-up now...mature and responsible.

I thought to myself, he was ready for this.

Before he left, Harvey sat in his bedroom playing 'Ring of Fire' on his guitar, knowing I loved this song. I told him how proud I was of him, how talented he was, and I gave him a hug, telling him I loved him. He jokingly told me to stop being weird, but he said he loved me too, and not long after, he left. It was the last time I would ever see my beautiful son.

The following morning, Harvey sent me a picture message of the view from the cottage, and everything seemed fine. However, what I didn't know at the time was that the boys had decided to go on a camping trip. It later transpired that another 18-year-old boy Harvey had recently met at college, a newly qualified driver, had also gone and was actually the one driving. Just over an hour later, after sending me the text, my son and his three friends were dead.

After some of my texts didn't go through, I started to get concerned. The next thing I knew, we were frantically driving around Snowdonia, having discovered they were missing. Our worry soon turned to panic, and we made our way to Bangor police station. The feeling of being told they had found four bodies, and one they believed to be my son, is indescribable. The pain of that moment felt as much physical as it did mental. It was as if my world had stopped right there in that instant.

A suffocating numbness washed over me, and I felt I was being ripped apart from the inside. Time felt like it froze, like everything around me became a blur. It was as though the world was no longer a place I wanted to be. The life I had known, filled with my son's laughter, his music, his dreams, was ripped away in an instant. It is an unbearable shock and pain. I wanted to die myself, just to escape the nightmare I was now living. The thought of facing a world without my son, without his presence, was too much to bear. I don't remember much after that moment; my partner said I was howling, saying on repeat that it couldn't be Harvey. I knew in that instant I would only 'exist' for the rest of my days.

It later emerged that the young driver had lost control of the car on the bend of a rural road. The vehicle ended up in a water-filled ditch, and despite their attempts to escape, all four boys tragically drowned. The news of their deaths was overwhelming. To know that Harvey and his friends had suffered such a tragic end, unable to survive and escape the car, is a pain I cannot put into words. The grief I feel in the wake of this loss is all-consuming, and the loss of my son has left a permanent aching void in my life. It is something that, unless you are unfortunate enough to ever experience yourself, you will never even come close to understanding the pain.

In the months following Harvey's passing, I could barely function, only leaving my bed to attend the funeral. The circumstances surrounding his trip have weighed heavily on me. I would never have allowed him to go if I had known the full details. A friend informed me that in some countries newly qualified drivers are not allowed to take peer-age passengers for a set period, and are required to gain experience on rural roads first. It seemed like common sense to me, and I thought it was a no-brainer.

After weeks of research, I began my campaign to make driving safer for young drivers, advocating for change in the light of the shocking statistic that 76% of fatalities in crashes involving young drivers are not the driver themselves. Anyone could be affected. I've had to publicly share my grief, putting it on display for the media, in order to leverage their coverage and raise awareness about the horrifying statistics around young driver crashes. All of this, while I still haven't had the time or space to process my own pain.

In October 2024 at the inquest, we learned that the boys had all been practically unharmed by the crash. They were conscious and tried to escape the car. Thanks to the manual back windows, Harvey was able to wind his window down. However, due to the lack of a simple safety hammer, something that could have shattered the glass in seconds and cut through seat belts, precious time was lost. The thought of Harvey's and the boys' final moments will haunt me for the rest of my life. I strongly believe that such a safety tool should be made mandatory in all cars. While it is difficult to determine how many lives such devices could save in the long run, in cases like Harvey's it would have made the difference between life and death.

Although ultimately I feel it is a reactive solution to a more deep-rooted problem. If my son wasn't able to get in the car, due to safety measures in place to protect newly qualified drivers and their passengers, then he would not have needed the hammer, as the crash would not have taken place. My campaign is not about punishing young people but about protecting them. Implementing these safety measures would help safeguard their lives by addressing the risks associated with inexperience and impulsivity, allowing them to enjoy their freedom without facing unnecessary danger.

During the course of the inquest, the evidence revealed matters giving rise to concern, which the coroner published, stating that he felt there is a risk that future deaths will occur unless action is taken where younger people are carried in motor vehicles driven by newly qualified and/or young drivers, and that preventative action should be taken.

After nearly a year of campaigning, I should have felt relief when the coroner issued this 'Preventing Future Deaths' report. But sadly, as part of the Forget Me Not Families Uniting group, I know that similar recommendations have been made in the past, with no real change.

Unfortunately, there will never be a victory for families like ours, because our children are gone forever. If people truly understood the depth of our pain, along with the level of commitment we parents put into researching the overwhelming evidence, we might be taken more seriously in our fight for change.

I hope this debate forces everyone to confront the scale of the problem. Every day without action means more families torn apart, more lives lost.

Protecting young drivers, their passengers, and other road users should never be a matter of political division. It's a moral issue. The evidence is clear: young people's brains are still developing, making them more prone to risky decisions behind the wheel.

Protecting young drivers is not just about statistics; it's about lives lost."

Thank you, Crystal, for your story—we really appreciate it.

To conclude, how can we keep young people safe on our roads? There are many calls for additional training or support for newly qualified drivers. The Association of British Insurers concludes that over two thirds of insurers now employ some form of telematics, or black box, to monitor driving behaviours by new drivers to reduce risk factors. We have heard proposals to increase training and awareness of the risk on rural roads, and about the need to invest in and maintain those roads to reduce hazards. We could invest more in public transport in our rural areas to offer our young people a viable alternative mode of transport so that they can access services. Finally, there are proposals for specific safety measures, such as mandating the carrying of an emergency glass hammer in every vehicle as a new standard.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Julia Buckley: I will not. Such a device can smash the window or cut the seatbelt in case of emergency. We could call it Harvey's hammer, in memory of one young man from Shrewsbury whose legacy has brought us all here today.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Desmond Swayne (in the Chair): There will be a three-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches.

9.47 am

Anna Sabine (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) for calling this important debate. That is an incredibly

difficult speech to follow, and I am feeling very emotional. I also thank all the families here today.

I have two teenage children, one of whom is now 18, and he is about to learn to drive. It is really helpful if young people in my constituency can drive themselves around, because—especially in villages such as the one he lives in—they are often at the mercy of unreliable and infrequent bus services. As his mum, I am of course encouraging him to learn: he will be able to be more independent, and it is an important life skill. But I have some really serious concerns about his safety when he starts to drive.

My constituency has a lot of A roads that are windy and fast, and they often have junctions off to the side, from which drivers are trying to pull out on to the main road. We have a history of accidents in the local area, including a horrendous one in 2023, when two young sisters were killed by an oncoming vehicle driven by someone who was high on drugs. That accident took place on a very dangerous junction outside Frome, and I am campaigning for traffic lights to be installed there, but I am coming up against a lack of council or Government funding to get the new infrastructure installed. We cannot put in the preventive measures my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) mentioned if we cannot fund them.

We know from figures provided by Brake that one in five drivers crash within a year of their test, and more than 1,500 young drivers are killed or injured on the roads each year. We know that carrying passengers or driving at night are major risk factors for younger drivers. I certainly remember careering around the roads where I grew up as a teenager, in cars packed with friends, listening to music too loudly. The thought makes me shudder when I look back on it.

Sadly, we also know that younger drivers are more likely to be involved in a crash caused by speed. Serious consideration needs to be given to graduated driving licences.

Robin Swann: I thank the hon. Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) for securing the debate. In Northern Ireland, we still have restricted driving, where a newly qualified driver must display an R plate and is restricted to 45 mph for one year after passing their test. Not everything has to be new; there are places where restrictions are working along the lines of the graduated scheme suggested by the hon. Member for Frome and East Somerset (Anna Sabine).

Anna Sabine: That is exactly right. I am keen that when we discuss this issue, we look at good practice from other places.

Graduated driving licences can be set up in a number of ways, but typically might involve minimum periods for learning to drive, and reducing the number of passengers a young person can have in the car. In the UK, we already have a version of this system for motorbikes. We recognise that young motorcyclists probably should not ride the most powerful bikes straightaway, and we restrict them accordingly. Even motoring groups such as the RAC have supported moves towards a graduated driving licence scheme in recent times, and I intend to explore the idea in my own political party.

[Anna Sabine]

I totally understand why young people might resist or resent the idea of graduated driving licences. I can also see why, in rural areas such as mine or that of the hon. Member for Shrewsbury, really stringent restrictions on driving—such as preventing young people from driving at night—might make it hard for them to get to their jobs or educational settings if buses are not frequent enough. But I think the idea warrants a conversation, because young people have the most to lose if we cannot get this right.

9.50 am

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Desmond. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) for bringing this really important debate to the House and for sharing so movingly the case involving the tragic death of her constituent Harvey.

Road safety is a serious concern for my constituents. In 2023, there were 183 reported injuries and one fatality on our roads. In early 2024, prior to being elected, I campaigned with local councillor Marcus Dearden and the Mayor of West Yorkshire, Tracy Brabin, to address speeding issues in Bingley. We successfully secured average speed cameras on a 50 mph stretch of dual carriageway that was often used as a racetrack by young drivers, but it is challenging to get those sorts of road safety measures in place.

We have already heard from others about the higher risk that young drivers face. One in four deaths from collisions involves a young car driver, and we know that this is more prevalent among young men. We have also heard people speak movingly about the huge impact on families. When I was growing up, a school friend's younger brother died tragically in a motorbike accident on the A65 between Ilkley and Burley in Wharfedale, in my constituency. His parents and brother have suffered a lifetime of grief as a result of that accident.

I strongly support the West Yorkshire Vision Zero strategy, which takes a partnership approach to eliminate all traffic fatalities and serious injuries by 2040. It brings together the combined authority, the local authority, the emergency services and National Highways, as well as victim support services and road safety campaigners. I really hope that such approaches are implemented and supported nationally by my hon. Friend the Minister.

We need to make it easier for local people to identify speeding hotspots where speed cameras are needed and to push for them. In addition, I urge the Minister to give some consideration to post-test licence restrictions, possibly through an amendment to the Road Traffic (New Drivers) Act 1995, which has already introduced a new driver probation period of two years.

In closing, I emphasise that we must also recognise that older drivers pose a risk to themselves and others, with those over 86 posing a similar risk to young men. Perhaps I will bring that forward as a topic for future debate.

9.53 am

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Sir Desmond. I commend the hon. Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) for securing this important debate.

Just three weeks after the 2024 general election, four young men were killed in Ullenwood, just outside my constituency, when their car collided with a tree. They were three 20-year-olds and one 18-year-old. "This is Andrei, my child full of dreams," his mother said in a tribute to her son.

Of course, it is not always young people who suffer such accidents, but many suffer vicariously through the loss of their loved ones. I recall the deaths of two motorcyclists, which happened separately but within 90 minutes, on the same stretch of road on 30 August 2023. One lost his life near Ashchurch, and the other near Evesham. One was a friend of a friend. Let the record recall Philip Beer, described by his lifelong friend Richard Price as an ex-Conservative councillor in Longlevens ward, but the good type of Tory—very moderate and centrist—and someone who had voted for Labour and the Liberal Democrats in recent years. He was a Spurs supporter. He left behind his wife, Louise, and his children, Izzy, Charlie and Henry.

I have previously spoken of my admiration for members of the emergency services, who selflessly put themselves in harm's way to protect and treat others. I hope everyone in this room will spare a thought for our police officers, paramedics and firefighters who arrive at the scenes of road traffic collisions.

In July, I learned a truly shocking statistic: one in five young people will be involved in a reportable road traffic collision in the year following their driving test. In 2023 alone, there were 281 road collisions in the Tewkesbury constituency, and just under 20% involved people aged between 17 and 24—that is one young person per week, just in Tewkesbury.

Driving is popular among all demographics in my constituency. Many young people use cars to travel to school, to see their friends and to play for local sports teams. Like Shrewsbury, Tewkesbury, with its broadly dispersed towns and villages, suffers from irregular and unreliable public transport, so driving is heavily relied on. According to the Department for Transport, there has been a 24% decline in passenger journeys on local bus services in the Gloucestershire region since 2015.

We should acknowledge that, for many young people, learning to drive is a significant milestone and a source of immense pride. But it is one that exposes them to significant risk. Men aged 17 to 25 have higher rates of fatal road collisions than almost any other age group—they are second only to over-85s.

One initiative that I proudly endorse is the under-17 Pathfinder Initiative, which is active in Gloucestershire, West Mercia, Yorkshire and Humberside. It is a low-cost and socially mobile initiative, with various bursaries available so that young people of all socioeconomic backgrounds can benefit. Volunteers guide aspiring drivers through theoretical and practical training in a controlled environment, away from public roads. In August 2024, I visited the initiative in South Cerney and was driven around safely by a young lady under tuition, alongside her father.

The reduction of speed limits is controversial among drivers, and I myself sometimes find the practice frustrating. However, this cannot be about our own frustrations; rather, it must be about our children. A reduction in the speed limit on high-risk routes in Lincolnshire resulted in a 75% reduction in collisions in which someone was

killed or seriously injured. For that reason, I would endorse the practice in Gloucestershire. I hope the Minister will take those statistics back to her Department, alongside my endorsements.

9.57 am

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond—I miss our Tuesday morning meetings. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) for securing the debate. I am speaking because road safety for young drivers is a crucial issue in my constituency.

My constituency is semi-rural, and learning to drive is a huge part of becoming independent from one's parents; indeed, my parents forced me to learn to drive at the age of 17 because they did not want to drive me around any more. Local transport links are not good enough: buses do not run regularly enough or late enough for young people to rely on them in order to play sport, go to college, see friends or visit local town centres at weekends. By the age of 17, many of my constituents want to be able to drive to school without having to rely on their parents. Unfortunately, that also means that my constituency has far too many tragic accidents involving young drivers.

In 2000, four teenagers died after Adam, a 17-year-old newly qualified driver, crashed his car. Adam, Jonathon, Craig and James were planning to celebrate the birthday of one of their friends just a few hours after Adam crashed. An inquest found that defects in the vehicle's condition, tyre pressure imbalance and a comparative lack of driving experience were contributing factors to Adam's crash. In 2017, Trudi-Mae Kennell, Ryan Barber and Will Louch died on a journey back from Snowdonia to Atherstone and an unnamed 18-year-old was arrested on suspicion of causing death by dangerous driving. Most recently, in 2024, a teenage boy suffered serious head injuries after his car hit a tree and caught fire in Polesworth. It was reported as miraculous that he survived the crash. All those young people had so much ahead of them, and it is sad to see that their crashes belong to a pattern.

There is so much discussion about what policies to propose to tackle this issue, but the first must be to push for our young people to wear seatbelts. Between 2019 and 2023, 16% of younger car drivers involved in serious collisions did not wear seatbelts. We need to make sure that our young people know that if they do not feel confident driving with passengers, they should not do so. We need to make sure that before passing a driving test, young people have experience of driving in the dark and with passengers. And we need to make sure we, as adults, challenge risky driving behaviour whenever we see it.

9.59 am

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) for securing this important debate. Just a few weeks after my election, I received a letter from my constituent, Jane. She is a mother who has had to endure the unthinkable pain of burying her 17-year-old son. Will died in a collision in June. He was a smart and popular young man, with a passion for judo, maths and computers. My heart goes out to Jane and her family.

Jane's son had passed his test just one month prior to his death. She told me:

"As a mother, I did everything I could to protect him. I persuaded my son not to drive with his friends in his car for the first month...I felt I could not request this for longer when his friends didn't have such rules and it wasn't law."

I remember myself, when I passed my test and first went out with a group of teenage friends, how intimidating that was.

Why has the UK not taken action already? Under the coalition Government, the potential adoption of graduated driving licences was discussed, but various issues arose. One problem was the impact on less affluent young people, who may be more adversely affected by restricted driving hours—for example, working 17-year-olds who need access to a car to work at night or for early-hours shift work. How can young people who rely on carpooling to cut transport costs do so if there are passenger limitations? There are obstacles, particularly in rural areas such as the villages in my constituency of Horsham.

I support the hon. Member for Shrewsbury and my constituent Jane by joining their call for the Government to take action. We should see an impact assessment of the various graduated driving schemes, many of which are already in operation around the world, so we can make the right choice for the 60% of the public who, as polls suggest, already support them.

Finally, I thank Jane for bringing her heartbreaking story to me. It cannot be easy to campaign with a wound so recent. I would like Jane to know that it is only because of individuals such as her that we are able to have this debate, and perhaps because of them, change will come.

10.2 am

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond. I wholeheartedly commiserate with the hon. Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) about the distressing tale that she has had to tell and that the parents have had to bear.

In constituencies such as mine, Tiverton and Minehead, getting a car can often be the only way young people get to meet their friends without relying on the taxi service of mum and dad. It is integral to growing their sense of independence and self-sufficiency. Rural areas such as mine are not blessed with good public transport systems, so cars are the predominant means of transport, whether for business or leisure.

In Tiverton and Minehead, where we have almost no sixth form provision, young people often need a car to get to their place of learning. When the buses are overcrowded and sometimes late, and journeys are always long, those cars can be a powerful vehicle, literally, of academic and vocational aspiration.

Nationally, Government figures estimate that one in five young drivers will crash within a year of passing their test, and that more than 1,500 young drivers are killed or seriously injured on this country's roads each year. In Tiverton and Minehead, over the past five years, there was a total of 244 casualties in accidents where at least one participant, not including pedestrians, was under the age of 26. Of those, 35 were serious and three were fatal.

[Rachel Gilmour]

The Government must support measures to reduce the number of tragedies caused by road traffic accidents, including investment in road safety, infrastructure and maintenance, better enforcement on speeding and law breaking, education programmes, and better safety technology in the modern industry.

To conclude, I admit that I do not have the solutions, but I have faith that we, as a Parliament, and more widely through a national conversation, can move the dial on the issue. We can find a way to protect our young people without blocking them from cars, which can provide a route to community for them. We owe it to our young people to do that, and to all those affected by road collisions. I know we can rise to the challenge that it poses.

10.4 am

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond. Before I start, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) for her incredibly moving story, particularly her story about Harvey. The hearts of everyone in this Chamber today will go out to Harvey's family for what must have been an absolutely terrible ordeal. Sadly, one does not have to go far in my constituency of Harlow to see signs of a road traffic incident—a damaged traffic island, a crushed crash barrier, a single bunch of flowers or a football scarf tied to a lamppost.

I also agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury about the issues on rural roads. Like previous speakers, my constituency is made up of urban areas, Harlow, and rural areas, such as Roydon. I have met the Roydon community speed watch team to talk about the issues they face; I will go into some of my suggestions as to how we can solve those if I have time.

In 2022, there were a total of 228 casualties in Harlow, two of which were fatalities and 51 were life-changing serious injuries. There have been over 1,000 incidents since 2018. I recognise that I do not have a lot of time, but I will briefly mention the two young gentleman who I had the pleasure to teach and who I mentioned in the Chamber a few weeks ago. The impact of losing someone so young is huge for those families and for everyone who knows and cares about them. Later in the week, there will be a debate about road safety around schools, which I look forward to taking part in, but I agree with what hon. Members have said about education.

I will finish by mentioning my pet peeve—I am sure many campaigners in the room will agree—that when an issue of road safety is raised with the relevant authority, it takes so long to get the necessary road safety interventions in place. I ask the Minister to give that some consideration.

Sir Desmond Swayne (in the Chair): I am afraid I must reduce the time limit to a formal two-minute limit.

10.7 am

Mrs Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) for securing this debate.

In the words of my constituents Mark and Mandy Ogden, whose daughter Georgia died on 26 June 2020:

“The last thing we want is to parade our grief, but we need people to understand the devastation these road deaths cause.”

Georgia, known as Gee to her family, was 17. She had been out for the evening and was in a car with another teenage passenger, driven by a third teenage girl. They were all wearing their seatbelts. Mandy talks about the pain of four years now without hearing Gee's voice, her cute laugh, her silliness and random outbursts of singing, her tantrums over something and nothing, her sassiness, her incredible dancing and performing. She speaks of a gaping hole at the loss of her daughter and of the loneliness and emptiness that she has left. It is indescribable. Mandy told me of the knock at the door and the immediate realisation of what had happened, and that the day that Gee was killed will haunt her for the rest of her days.

Sadly, there are several tributes on A roads around my constituency to other young people who have been killed in surprisingly similar circumstances. Roads in our area are dark, fast and dangerous. We cannot change the entire rural road network, certainly not in the short term, but we can change the law. Mark and Mandy are now part of Forget-me-not Families Uniting, the campaign group alluded to by previous speakers, which is calling on us to save young lives through the introduction of graduated driving licensing and through the creation of an expert panel to advise the Government on how graduated driving licensing in the UK should look.

The Department for Transport's 2019 road safety statement noted there is evidence that graduated driving licensing schemes, where they have been introduced elsewhere, have proved very effective at improving the safety of young drivers. For example in California, where drivers aged under 18 cannot take passengers under 20 unless supervised, and in New Zealand where young and newly qualified drivers go on to a restricted licence, which means—

Sir Desmond Swayne (in the Chair): Order. I call Jim Shannon.

10.9 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) for setting the scene, and I convey my sympathies to the families in the Gallery on the loss of their young ones. I am very sorry to hear of the horrific accident that occurred in north Wales where four young boys died.

I am concerned to put forward the issues relating to Northern Ireland. Due to the lack of experience, young people are more at risk of being in accidents. Addressing those challenges requires a combination of legislative action and educational awareness. Those are the two things I want to speak about.

In 2019, young people aged between 16 and 24 accounted for almost 21% of those killed or seriously injured in road traffic collisions in Northern Ireland. Young drivers are taught to expect the unexpected and to remain cautious on the road. There have been conversations in Northern Ireland regarding enhanced driver education and whether it would benefit young people to take further driving training after they have passed their tests. That is one of the things that we are looking at.

What are the challenges on the road for young people? There is peer pressure, drug and alcohol use, and mobile phone use, but sometimes road accidents are pure misfortune. The use of mobile phones while driving can cause excessive speeding, lack of concentration and ultimately distraction, leading to an increased likelihood of a crash or collision. There is the issue of young motorists travelling late at night, which the previous Government were prepared to look at, as well as excessive speed.

There is much more that can be done, especially in our schools. My key ask of the Minister is for young people to be taught the importance of road safety. Once people hit 17 and can start driving, the freedom is immense, but we must remind them of the importance of being cautious on the roads, because they can be faced with complex and dangerous situations every day. I look forward to hearing the Minister and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith), speak about their commitment to young people and to ensuring that our road safety legislation is as tight as possible.

10.11 am

Mr Bayo Alaba (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) for securing this important debate and sharing the tragic loss of young Harvey. Ahead of this debate, I met Gillian and John McGrath, constituents of mine in Southend East and Rochford, whose daughter was tragically killed in March 2009 by a newly qualified driver. Eleanor Grace McGrath was hit by a 17-year-old driver who was showing off to his friends when he struck a crowd of children, 14 of whom experienced severe injuries. Sadly, the story and the loss of Eleanor Grace are not unique.

Following Eleanor's death, two of her closest friends and Gillian and John set up the campaign Driving with Grace, which produced a documentary to educate our young people on the devastating impact of road collisions. The documentary has been shown to young people across Essex and has had a significant impact. I welcome the announcement of the new national road safety strategy. Will the Minister consider a P plate system, which is a key recommendation of the Driving with Grace campaign, in the next steps of the strategy? It would mean that new drivers must display a P plate for the first year after passing their test, encouraging other drivers to give them space and potentially making new drivers less likely to show off.

As a parent, I understand the constant conflict between granting young people the freedom they deserve and worrying about keeping them safe. Tragedies such as the loss of Eleanor Grace are far too common. Moving forward, we have to make changes. I am sure all Members present will join me in commending my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury on securing this debate.

10.13 am

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) for securing this important debate.

I want to put on record the story of Sonny Crane, whose family live in my constituency, Hertford and Stortford, and whose mother, Naomi, is here in

Westminster Hall today. Just over three years ago, Sonny was tragically killed in a road traffic accident, and the impact on Sonny's family since his loss has been simply devastating. I was struck by his mother's words when we first met:

"he went out that day, a young 19 year old boy going to enjoy Topgolf with his friends, never to return."

Across the country, there are far too many cases like Sonny's. We know that crashes are more likely to happen when young drivers are carrying friends in the car at night-time, and when driving conditions are difficult, but it does not need to be that way. Any death on the road is one too many. I am therefore confident that the Minister appreciates the seriousness of this issue and the need for action.

I would be grateful if the Minister could look into the best practices on young driver safety used in other countries and seek to incorporate them into her road safety strategy. I would also be grateful if she could detail in her response how the Government are supporting local leaders and communities to make our roads safer, particularly in semi-rural constituencies such as mine. Naomi told me that Sonny's favourite phrase was, "I'm here for a good time, not a long time." Tragically, Sonny was not with us for a long time, but I know that he is lovingly remembered by his mother, who describes him as, "Sonny by name, sunny by nature." We can honour his memory by working to ensure that no young person is taken too soon because of a road traffic accident.

10.15 am

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under you in the Chair today, Sir Desmond. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) on securing the time for this debate today and also for reading Crystal's testimony, which was incredibly moving.

This is a timely debate, because the road safety strategy is currently under development. Like this debate, I hope that strategy takes the approach that we should never see deaths or serious accidents on our roads as an acceptable consequence of the perceived freedoms that car ownership can bring. For young drivers in particular—although this applies to all drivers when learning—there is a focus on passing the test rather than learning how to drive. That is why the graduated approach to learning to drive is so important, because it slows things down and forces those who want to drive to focus on learning.

Globally, the graduated driving licences work. In New Zealand, they have reduced accidents for people between the ages of 15 and 19 by 23% and for those between 20 and 24 by 20%. That is quite incredible and is within the context, as has been repeated here today, that one in five new drivers will crash in their first year—an absolutely incredible statistic, if we are honest with ourselves. There will be arguments against this approach, but it should never be the case that the implementation of a graduated driver's license is framed within that argument about restricting young people's liberty, because poor public transport should never be an excuse for exposing our young people to danger. I know action in this area will be difficult, but I really hope that the road safety strategy presents us with an opportunity to do something.

10.17 am

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond. I start by warmly congratulating my good and hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) on securing this important debate, and saying thank you for the stories that have been shared this morning. In Suffolk Coastal we are proudly rural, with A and B roads stretching the full 40 miles of the constituency. I could use my speech today to describe in great detail the danger of rural roads, but everyone has done that well and, with just two minutes, I will resist the urge. Instead, I will throw my weight behind the call that we have heard this morning for a graduated licence scheme. In places such as Suffolk, the problem is incredibly severe and our many rural roads give impetus to the need for such a scheme. Some 38% of collisions in Suffolk were a result of a young driver behind the wheel. This problem is real.

A graduated driving licence scheme would put a set of restrictions on new drivers who have recently passed their practical test for an initial period. Some of these restrictions are important for us to properly debate and give real consideration to. As we have just heard, not everyone will be in agreement, but we must accept that we need to do more to challenge these horrific statistics and to make sure that lives are saved going forward.

I will not take up any more time, but may I just personally thank everybody who has come in today and who has shared their personal stories? They have been hugely touching: as my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury said at the beginning, you have put your grief on the line to share these stories and we are deeply moved by it. Thank you so much.

10.19 am

Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) for securing this important debate. Road safety is not just a policy issue but a matter of life or death, and one that affects all our communities, including Birmingham Erdington.

Last October, a young driver in Erdington lost control and collided with a tree on Tyburn Road. The accident resulted in one fatality and life-changing injuries for the other person involved. Only weeks ago, near Castle Vale, a driver and a passenger fled the scene after a serious accident, leaving another young man hospitalised. Just last night, a railway bridge, which I have talked about before, was hit again, leaving trains cancelled in the area. Those incidents highlight the urgent need for action.

Every single day, five lives are lost on UK roads. That means that five families are affected and five entire communities are forever changed due to road safety failures. For young drivers, road crashes are the leading cause of death. That shocking reality demands immediate action. There are many reasons for that. The pitfalls in early adulthood include overconfidence, inexperience and the wish to take risks.

The West Midlands has appointed two commissioners to advise on road safety, so I hope we will finally start to treat these issues with the urgency they demand. We

cannot wait for another tragedy to drive action. Let us honour the memories of those we have lost by making our roads safer now.

10.21 am

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): Once a person has passed their driving test in this country, they are simply released on to the roads. This new Parliament must act to change that.

On Boxing day 2017, a 17-year-old from Suffolk crashed his Ford Fiesta, his first car. His friends William Smedley and Jake Paxton, just 18 years old, both from Bury St Edmunds, died.

Men who have recently learned to drive are at high risk of accidents. Graduated drivers licences have been adopted in the United States, Canada, New Zealand, Sweden and Australia. They work so well at reducing accidents that they are being expanded all over the place and states are progressively adopting stricter rules. From December 2024, Western Australia, which previously had the most lenient system of licensing in the country, placed limits on the number of passengers that someone could carry. The legislation is known as Tom's law, in reference to Tom Saffioti, a 15-year-old boy who died in a crash while a passenger in a car driven by a new driver.

In the UK, drivers can display a P plate after passing the test, but those come with no additional rules. Let us graduate the licence for drivers in the UK. That is not the nanny state; it is simply good government. Everyone in room seems to agree, so let us make it happen.

10.22 am

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) for her eloquent and emotional speech.

The issue being discussed today is not new. Many years ago, when I attended a school reunion, I was told that two of my schoolmates had died in road traffic accidents very young. One was on the way to see his son. Those young lives were lost, and the families were devastated.

Young male car drivers are four times more likely to be killed or seriously injured than other car drivers aged 25 or over. We have already discussed the prospect of having a graduated driving licence, and there is precedent for that in countries that have already been mentioned. We could have a two-year probation period with N plates, lower drink-drive limits and monitoring to ensure that young drivers do not drive late at night. Other measures we could take include having limits on engine sizes to reduce the driving of powerful vehicles and making the use of P plates mandatory for a set period after passing the test.

Young drivers represent just over 5% of those who have a full UK driving licence, but 20% of drivers involved in fatal or serious collisions. Although the Department for Transport rejected a graduated driving licence in 2020, it is time to reconsider that proposal. Young drivers have their whole lives in front of them in which they can drive as many cars as they want, so let us help them to do that without being killed and without killing others in the process.

10.24 am

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I do not want to rehearse the points that have already been made so eloquently by my colleagues from across Westminster Hall. I merely want to say that education has been mentioned briefly, but given that almost all road collisions, and therefore deaths and serious injuries, are preventable, I hope the Minister will do everything she can, as she considers the road safety strategy, to ensure that all available resources are given to local authorities, to police and crime commissioners and to police forces so that they can into schools and reach our young people.

I will also just mention that Warwickshire county council has a safe and active schools programme that looks at primary school age groups and “The Journey” for secondary schools. The police and crime commissioner has a focus on young people in his road safety strategy. Every effort must be made to make an impression upon impressionable young minds from as early as possible, so that we can reduce the risk of these tragic deaths.

10.26 am

Claire Hughes (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) for securing this important debate, and specifically for mentioning road safety on rural roads.

Sadly, nowhere is the devastating impact of crashes on rural roads better demonstrated than by telling Olivia’s story. Olivia Alkir, a much-loved 17-year-old, was denied her bright future when she was killed in the passenger seat of a friend’s car. The driver had been racing on another rural road when he lost control and crashed head-on into an approaching vehicle at 80 mph. He had only passed his driving test the day before. Olivia’s tragic death in 2019 devastated her family, of course, but also the wider community of Efenectyd, near Ruthin.

Olivia’s mother, Jo, is determined that her daughter’s story will save other people’s lives. I am sure that it already has saved lives, because Olivia’s family decided to work with North Wales Police to create a hard-hitting film designed to warn other young people about the dangers of reckless driving. Olivia’s story has been shown to learner drivers in schools all across Wales and indeed in this House, thanks to the work of my predecessor, Simon Baynes, who represented what was then the constituency of Clwyd South.

Olivia’s story brings into sharp focus the need for action. I welcome the new Government’s road safety review and I implore the Minister to leave no stone unturned in her mission to improve road safety for young people, including learning from other countries, listening to campaigners such as Crystal Owen and considering the use of emerging technologies, such as AI and telematics, which are developing all the time.

I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response to the debate and to seeing further action in the coming months.

Sir Desmond Swayne (in the Chair): I call Alison Bennett, spokesperson for the Lib Dems.

10.27 am

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Sir Desmond, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) on securing this really important debate. I also thank Crystal for sharing her heartbreaking testimony.

I am now old enough to have been driving for 30 years and during the debate I have been reflecting on the joy I felt when I passed my driving test, aged 17. I grew up in Gloucestershire, so to pass my test and be able to travel around the county, meeting friends in Gloucester, Stroud and Tewkesbury, truly was a liberation. How lucky I was. However, two of my classmates, Paul Torrington and Lee Mortimer, were far less lucky than me. A few years after leaving school both were killed, in separate road traffic accidents, and I also reflect today on the opportunities I have had in the past 30 years that they have missed out on.

Between 2004 and 2023, fatalities involving younger drivers decreased by 60%—a true testament to the effectiveness of education, awareness-raising and the tireless efforts of campaigners. Despite that improvement, however, last year road traffic accidents still claimed the lives of 1,624 people across the UK, so there is clearly still work to do. As we have already heard, young drivers—especially young men—aged between 17 and 25 are over-represented in such statistics.

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): May I express my sadness and join others in commemorating constituents lost? I would like to name Sammy Phillips and Lewis Moghul, who died in Bix, just metres from where I lived at the time. As a father, I can express sympathy, but I can never really, truly understand such pain. Other Members have spoken of the particular hazards that drivers face on rural roads, including the darkness, narrowness, higher speed limits and other dangers. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be helpful to look specifically at the dangers on rural roads?

Alison Bennett: I absolutely agree that, as we have heard from a number of Members this morning, the risks of rural roads are particularly profound.

We need to find ways to protect people on rural roads and all other people who share those roads with drivers, and today we have had the chance to reflect on the tragic deaths of Hugo, Harvey, Wilf and Jevon. We are also here to remember every other one of those 1,625 people who lost their lives on British roads last year and the countless more in years gone by.

In my own constituency of Mid Sussex, I recently met Marie, who lost her 22-year-old son in December 2014 to a road traffic accident. He was a backseat passenger in a car being driven by a newly qualified driver, who was 21. He was driving in excess of 100 mph on a country lane when he lost control. The car landed on its roof, and the two passengers in the back lost their lives. Marie’s son left behind two young boys; one was eight months old at the time, and the other was five years old. As we have heard, we can and must learn from these terrible events.

With our remarkable progress in reducing road fatalities over the past few decades, the UK now boasts one of the lowest road death rates per 1 million people in

[Alison Bennett]

Europe. However, every death is one too many, and we must use this improvement as inspiration that better is possible and that change saves lives, not as a reason to sit on our laurels and say, “Job well done.” My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I are firm in our belief that we need the Government to publish a road safety strategy without delay. Such strategies have previously delivered significant improvements in road safety. For instance, the Road Safety Observatory has noted a significant decline in road fatalities since the 1990s thanks to the 2000 road safety strategy, which delivered campaigns, such as THINK!, infrastructure improvements and more rigorous driving tests.

An updated strategy would surely be transformative in further reducing accidents and saving lives. Crucially, it would need to focus heavily on rural areas, where 60% of fatal collisions occur. We have seen success with the introduction of measures such as stricter drink-driving laws, seatbelt legislation and tougher driving tests, but we absolutely must improve public transport options to reduce our reliance on cars.

Young people, particularly those in rural areas, should not have to rely on dangerous journeys to get to work or education or to see friends, yet the sharp decline in bus services under the previous Government coupled with rising fares has made it harder for many young people to get around safely. In West Sussex, for example, we have seen a nearly 20% drop in available passenger journeys since 2015. Young people are simply so much more likely to end up driving when there are no decent alternatives. We can solve that by maintaining the £2 cap on bus fares, reopening smaller train stations and offering on-demand services where conventional buses are not viable.

Rural roads would also benefit greatly from better infrastructure, such as the installation of more overtaking lanes, as the RSO has suggested. As well as broader infrastructure strategies, we must embrace new ideas. One of the standout proposals today is Harvey’s hammer, which could be a game changer in saving lives and creating a more safety-conscious culture, especially among young drivers. New technology, coupled with better enforcement of speed limits, education programmes for all road users and investment in safer roads and vehicles, all of which have a proven track record of success, provide hope that we can do so much more in the years to come.

My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I have long championed road safety measures, and we will continue to do so. Marie, her son’s young family and the families of Hugo, Harvey, Wilf and Jevon are in our hearts as we strive for effective change. The Government must support measures to make these tragedies a rarity and support proposals such as Harvey’s hammer, which has the potential to save lives when these terrible events take place.

As hon. Members have set out today, we know that young people face disproportionate risks on the roads, but they should not be punished for it. Instead, we must give them the tools to stay safe. Let us focus on improving public infrastructure, enforcing road safety rules and providing better public transport options, using a new road safety strategy. We owe it to the memory of all

young people whose lives have been cut short, to their families, and to all who care about saving innocent lives.

10.35 am

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond. I congratulate the hon. Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) on bringing this important debate to Westminster Hall this morning. I thank all those who have contributed with powerful speeches. My heart goes out to any family who have lost a child or relative in a road accident. Every single death is a tragedy that should spur us on to do more to prevent future deaths and injuries, and make our roads safer. I cannot imagine the pain of any family getting the knock on the door from a police officer, or however the news is broken to them, to tell them that a child has died on our roads, as in this case, or under any other circumstances.

We must always look at practical measures to improve road safety through the lens of “To drive is freedom”. To drive brings opportunity. For many—I include myself in this—to drive brings pleasure. Our challenge is: what will protect those freedoms, opportunities and pleasures in a safer way?

Mrs Russell: Mandy Ogden said to me:

“Often, the main argument against this change to driver licensing is that it restricts freedom, but our daughter’s freedom has been taken away forever.”

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that, too, is an important point?

Greg Smith: In a few moments, I will come on to the measures that I think would protect the freedom to drive far better, as well as the safety of those who do so. There will perhaps not be agreement with every single point that hon. Members have made in the debate, but I repeat the point. Central to how I would like to look at this issue is not how we can restrict people more, but how we can make people safer in the first place by ensuring that they have the skills required to drive safely, be it in our cities and towns, on our rural roads and motorways, or indeed abroad, where often the rules can be very different. We all know the example of the German autobahns, many of which have no speed limit. It is vital to equip any British citizen going to Germany with the ability to handle a car at very great speed and be safe on those roads.

The challenge before us is how to make everybody— young people, for sure, but also old people, for whom the statistics are just as stark, as the hon. Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon) mentioned—safer and able to handle a vehicle in all conditions on our roads.

Dr Arthur: Back in 2020, an older driver caused a fatality in Edinburgh, killing a three-year-old boy. The fatal accident inquiry found that drivers over 80 should perhaps be subject to cognitive tests if they want to continue driving. That inquiry is currently with the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency. Will the shadow Minister support action in that area?

Greg Smith: It is important that we look at all evidence suggesting a problem and explore the basis for solving it, but I am no fan of knee-jerk legislation. This House is at its worst when we jump to knee-jerk solutions to

any problem presented. It is important to look at all the evidence, practical outcomes and potential unintended consequences. The case that the hon. Gentleman raises and the point that he makes are important and should be looked at—as he referenced, it is being looked at by the DVLA at the moment. I would be interested to hear the Minister's response to that point.

I double-underline that we should bear in mind that every death on our roads is a tragedy, but there has been significant improvement in road safety over recent years.

Anna Sabine: Will the hon. Member give way?

Greg Smith: I will just expand this point and then give way to the hon. Lady. Since road user casualties peaked in 1965, with nearly 8,000 deaths, there has been a concerted efforts to reduce the numbers. Thankfully, that effort has largely been successful, across successive Governments of all political persuasions.

According to Department for Transport figures, released in September last year, Great Britain ranked third out of 33 countries reported on in 2023 for the lowest number of road fatalities per million of the population. Of course, that number is still too high, but the direction of travel is positive, and we need to take further action—

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): Will the hon. Member give way?

Greg Smith: I promised to give way to the hon. Member for Frome and East Somerset (Anna Sabine), and will just finish this point. Mindful of time, I may then take one or two more interventions.

Although the claim of a 13% fall in casualties accurately reflects the raw data between 2010 and 2023, it fails to account for the context of vehicle miles, which have significantly increased. During that time, the number of vehicle miles increased from 306 billion to 334 billion. When adjusted to that context, the Department's data indicates a decrease in the casualty rate from 681 casualties per billion vehicle miles in 2010 to 398 in 2023, which is a 41% reduction. I repeat that we must still take action to get the number down to zero, but the direction of travel has been good.

Anna Sabine: The hon. Gentleman mentioned the personal tragedies of road accidents and refers to Members of all political persuasions. Does he agree that it is brilliant to see cross-party support for these campaigns, but that it might be more helpful for campaigners if His Majesty's Opposition were better represented in today's debate?

Greg Smith: I hesitate to go there, on what is a political point. When we are having a serious debate, comments like that are not necessarily helpful to the spirit of trying to engender cross-party working.

I have a history of looking at this subject, including with the Minister for the future of roads. In the previous Parliament, we both served on the Transport Committee, which conducted a deep inquiry into novice and young drivers and the implications for safety. We looked carefully at graduated driving licences and other things, such as the Under 17 Car Club, which was referred to earlier, and which I am a huge fan of. I am a huge fan of trying to get young people—potentially very young

people—in an off-road, safe, private-land setting and starting to understand how to drive and control a vehicle safely.

Cameron Thomas: I did not manage to make this point in my speech, but whereas one in five young people will be involved in a reportable road traffic collision in the year following their test, that figure is reduced to one in 33 for those who complete that course. I invite the hon. Member to agree.

Greg Smith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that point, and I entirely agree. The younger we can get people into any sort of powered vehicle, so that they can learn how to control it safely in different conditions in a safe, off-road, heavily supervised setting, the better. That work is all to the good and powerful, and I was certainly impressed by the evidence I heard in that Select Committee inquiry.

That raises a wider point that I invite the Minister to reflect on. I think it was encapsulated well by the hon. Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) when he said that young people are focused on passing a test rather than learning to drive. Our testing and learning system is too focused on a very limited set of circumstances that any individual seeking their first driving licence has to go through. Testing is done very often in an urban environment, but rarely on the rural roads that we have heard so much about, and learner drivers never go on the motorway and learn to control a car at significant speeds. My challenge to the Minister is this: how can we ensure that when a young person—or any person, for that matter—is granted their pass certificate and gets their full driving licence, they are properly equipped? To me, the solution is not putting in a graduated system afterwards; it is having the confidence that, when someone is issued with their licence, they are able and safe to control any motor vehicle to the best of their ability.

Graduated driving licences would take away too much from young people. We heard from young people in the Select Committee inquiry that I spoke about. What if a young person wants to go into the world of work? What if they want to do night shifts but are told they cannot drive at night? What if they wish to go into one of the emergency services and have to attend night-time emergencies, be that as a police officer—

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: With the hon. Gentleman give way?

Greg Smith: I have limited time, but I am happy to take up the debate afterwards.

What if the path that a young person wants to go down requires them to be able to drive a car at night? There have to be answers to these questions. I gently say to all hon. Members here this morning, including the Minister, that a driving licence must be equal for everybody, and that we must look most of all at how we can improve our confidence that everybody who is issued with one can control a vehicle in all circumstances, in all conditions and on all road types. That will involve a significant change, which will improve road safety for everybody.

10.47 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair this morning, Sir Desmond. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) on securing the debate and thank her for continuing to raise the vital issue of road safety. It is clear from the number of hon. Members present—I counted 26 contributions, but I may be wrong—that this is, rightly, an issue of huge public concern. I thank all those who made moving and compelling contributions. I also congratulate my hon. Friend for championing the excellent work that her constituent Crystal Owen is doing to highlight young driver safety following the tragic death of her son, Harvey.

In recent months I have been grateful to have the opportunity to meet with my hon. Friend, with Crystal and other members of Forget-me-not Families Uniting, including Sharron Huddleston and Dr Ian Greenwood, both of whom are here today, and with a number of other families whose lives have been affected by road death. Crystal, Ian, Sharron and many other families are in the Public Gallery, and my heart goes out to all of them. I thank them for taking the time to meet me, for their courage in sharing their heartbreaking stories, either with me or with their constituency MPs, and for their determination to make sure that other families do not face the same grief. It is vital that victims' voices are heard and their experiences shared, as they have been so movingly today. I am committed to continuing to engage as we develop our policies in this area.

I am sure that many of us remember reading about the deaths of Harvey Owen, Wilfred Fitchett, Jevon Hirst and Hugo Morris in November 2023, and no one could fail to be moved by hearing that terrible story again today in Crystal's own words. It is literally every parent's worst nightmare. The deaths of those four young men have had a devastating impact on their families and community, as have the deaths of other young people we have spoken about today. I am determined to take action to prevent such deaths in the future, and improving road safety is one of my Department's highest priorities.

Despite the two-year probation period for all new drivers that was introduced in 1995, in terms of population and number of miles driven, 17 to 24-year olds, and particularly young men, remain one of the highest fatality-risk groups, both as car drivers and as passengers. Although the latest statistics show that the number of young drivers killed on our roads has fallen by 80% since 1990, that cannot be a reason for complacency. The number of deaths in 2023 was 90, but that is 90 too many. Every one of those young lives lost leaves a devastated family, and often many families, including those of the passengers and other road users. There is a pressing need for action.

Although we are not considering graduated driving licences, we absolutely recognise that young people are disproportionately the victims of tragic collisions on our roads, which is why we are exploring options to tackle the root causes of the issue without unfairly penalising young drivers. The Government want to ensure young people's access to employment, education and other opportunities while keeping them safe on the roads.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and other hon. Members, particularly those representing rural and semi-rural areas, said, that means giving young people more choices by investing in public transport and active travel. The Government have already begun to do that by announcing additional funding for buses, walking and cycling in the Budget, but of course that goes alongside specific road safety measures.

Those efforts are supported by Driver2020, the Department's largest young driver research project, which evaluated a range of interventions to improve the safety of young drivers. The project tested the effectiveness of five non-legislative measures aimed at improving safety for young and novice drivers, including keeping a log book, extra hazard perception training, classroom-based education, mentoring agreements and telematics. Driver2020 began in January 2019, and more than 28,000 participants were recruited. The project was delayed by the pandemic, but the Department has now received the final report, which will inform our considerations. As a number of hon. Members said, we can also look to international experience. For example, a number of countries have a lower or zero alcohol limit for young drivers, or a minimum learning period.

Our THINK! campaign does important work to encourage safer attitudes and behaviours among young drivers. Its innovative campaigns are highly targeted to reach young men aged 17 to 24. People sometimes tell me, "I don't feel that I have seen some of those campaigns," but that perhaps is because they are not on the channels of the people we are most keen to target. Hon. Members will be pleased to hear that we have just launched the latest phase of our speeding campaign, which highlights the risk of driving too fast for the conditions of rural roads. As hon. Members have said, those circumstances contribute to high numbers of young driver casualties.

A number of hon. Members also talked about action to reduce speed, including lower speed limits, and to enforce speed limits, such as speed cameras. Improving our roads, changing speed limits and installing speed cameras are decisions for local traffic authorities. Obviously, they want to make those decisions in consultation with local communities and the local police. They know their roads best, and I cannot and should not dictate to them from Whitehall. However, I agree that such partnerships are essential and that they should be looking at local-level interventions to make our roads safer. The Department will look at what more we can do to support them, and we stand ready to work with all those working at a local level.

THINK! campaigns have shown positive results, but we know that changing ingrained attitudes and behaviours takes time. This year, we are doing even more to land the vital messages, including working with content creators and influential platforms such as LADBible to tackle speeding via the voices that young audiences trust. Before Christmas, THINK! launched a major new drink-driving campaign, which highlighted the risk of losing one's licence after drinking even a little before driving, and the subsequent impact on the freedoms that we know mean a lot to young drivers. As a number of hon. Members have said, we also need to address other dangerous behaviours, including failing to wear a seatbelt, using a mobile phone while driving and taking drugs before driving, which sadly is a growing problem. We need to use every opportunity to educate young people

about road safety, and that involves working with mayors, local councils, police and crime commissioners, police, schools, colleges, charities, and the many parents and families who have generously used their tragic experience to try to help others make better choices.

The Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency delivers a wide range of support targeted at keeping young drivers safe. The Ready to Pass? campaign helps learner drivers to assess when they are ready to take their test, and provides lots of useful information about safe driving for life. Many people have talked about the importance of driving in different road conditions, on rural roads, at night and in the dark. Pass Plus provides further education for drivers once they have passed their test. It is clear to me that we should consider what more can be done to support learner drivers and newly qualified drivers to be safe. My hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury raised the potential for measures to improve vehicle safety, such as the installation of a Harvey's hammer device. I will take that suggestion back to my officials for further consideration and write to my hon. Friend.

In my short time as Minister for the Future of Roads, I have heard too many heartbreaking accounts of loss and serious injury. We have been very moved to hear during this debate stories of hon. Members' constituents who have lost loved ones. I again thank all those Members who came to the debate to share them. It is vital that we hear the voices of those who have been most impacted by road deaths. I assure them that I am listening.

I want to assure everyone listening, but especially those who have been affected by road deaths and injuries, that this Government treat road safety with utmost seriousness. We are committed to reducing the numbers of those killed and seriously injured on our roads. As my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) said, we can never regard road deaths as inevitable. The majority of road crashes are avoidable, and that is why the Department is developing our road safety strategy. It will be the first in over a decade, and we will set out more details in due course. We will adopt a safe system approach. We need all partners working together—policymakers, road engineers and designers, vehicle manufacturers, the police and road users.

I will be pleased to keep in touch with my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury and other hon. Members as we progress our work on road safety and young drivers. I congratulate her once again on securing this important debate.

10.59 am

Julia Buckley: I thank all Members who have taken the time to listen and contribute to the debate, and I thank the bereaved families and campaigners for their time and for listening again to stories that can only be upsetting. I also thank the Minister for her time. I could hear in her summing-up that she was clearly listening to the messages that we put forward today, and we thank her for that. I am particularly pleased to hear that she might consider Harvey's hammer as a safety measure. I hope that she made note, too, of the local initiative that the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Cameron Thomas) described. I do not know whether it features in Driver2020, but that educational IT piece takes the rate of post-test driving collisions from one in five to one in 33.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Solar Farms: Agricultural Land

11.1 am

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered solar farms on agricultural land.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond. We are addressing an issue of great importance: the proliferation of solar farms on our agricultural land.

As many hon. Members know, I have dedicated much of my life to raising awareness about our ecological and climate crises. I have met people who are set to lose their entire countries to rising seas. Let me be clear: nobody can doubt my commitment to strong action on climate change. However, there are many ways to skin the climate cat, and I do not believe that solar parks on the scale of Cottam, Cleve Hill, Longfield, Mallard Pass, Gate Burton, Sunnica and the proposed Lime Down, in my own constituency of South Cotswolds, are the best way forward.

I have received numerous messages from residents near the proposed site of Lime Down. Without exception, they are distressed about the proposal, and I share their concerns. They are not nimbys; they are thoughtful, environmentally conscious people, who, like me, agree that we need renewables but at the right size, in the right places and in the right ownership.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): Like my hon. Friend, I am very keen on renewable energy. I am a Liberal Democrat, for heaven's sake! However, I am also a pragmatist. In Washford, in my constituency, a massive solar farm is being built on particularly good agricultural land. Would my hon. Friend agree that we must be practical and put solar panels on commercial buildings and residential houses, rather than on farmland?

Dr Savage: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I totally agree and will be coming to that point shortly.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing this debate. I suppose the issue is twofold. First, the farmers who sign up to solar farms are committed to a long-term lease, and that will impact the family inheritance tax potential. The second point comes in relation to using land better for food production, as it should be used, so that only land that is of a lesser quality, or rocky land, would be more suitable for solar farms. Does the hon. Lady agree that that is the way forward?

Dr Savage: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and I agree that that is the way forward.

Let us consider the facts. Our agricultural land is dwindling at an alarming rate. We are down to 14.8 million acres of arable land, the lowest amount since world war two, and we are losing nearly 100,000 acres annually. We already import nearly 60% of our food. Do we really want to increase that dependency on foreign supply chains?

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): My hon. Friend is being super generous and I am grateful to her. She makes excellent points. We obviously have means by which we can control how those things happen, through the environmental land management payment

[Tim Farron]

scheme and planning law. Would she agree that, through both of those streams, we should be able to ensure that food security is at least as important as energy security, and that we should not be using productive agricultural land for solar farms when they can be developed elsewhere? Westmorland and Furness Council, for example, has used disused land to provide a solar farm of its own on non-agricultural land.

Dr Savage: I agree with my hon. Friend that we should be prioritising locations that do not impact on our ability to meet our food security needs.

The environmental benefits of solar farms are not as clearcut as some would have us believe. Yes, they produce clean energy, but at what cost? Large installations can alter local ecosystems, potentially contaminate soil and even increase local temperatures due to heat absorption by the dark panels—and let us not forget the human cost. Tenant farmers face eviction. Land values are skyrocketing, making it harder for new farmers to enter the industry, and we risk losing the very character of our rural communities that underpins local tourism and our national identity.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): I agree with every word the hon. Lady has said so far. Does she agree with me that if we are to protect food security and give it equal billing with energy security and national security, not just solar installations are inappropriate, but the ancillary projects like those I am seeing in my constituency? For example, we have battery storage and National Grid coming along and saying it has to completely rebuild all of the substations on—guess what?—more agricultural land. This is a much bigger problem than just solar.

Dr Savage: I absolutely agree with the hon. Member's points. I am not against solar energy—far from it—but we need to be smart about how we implement it and all the associated infrastructure. Why not require all new homes to be fitted with solar panels, as proposed by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) in his sunshine Bill? Why not use the vast roof spaces of warehouses, public buildings and car parks? These are sensible, minimally intrusive ways to contribute to our net zero goals.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): I will confess that before being elected to this place, I spent 10 years in renewable energy finance. It is a common claim from certain activists and newspapers that we should put solar on commercial buildings. I do not disagree with that. The problem is the economics of it do not stand up from a finance perspective. Until the Government step in to guarantee a minimum amount of value for export, rooftop solar will never stack up. Neither will carport solar. That is why investors will always go for utility-scale. Does my hon. Friend agree that if we actually want to see a catalyst, if we want to see a change, if we want to see farmers growing crops and not solar panels, the Government need to step in and regulate the market?

Dr Savage: My hon. Friend makes some very interesting points that I look forward to exploring further with him in the future. I agree that we need Government to intervene to adjust the incentives so that we can meet our energy needs with the lowest cost to our countryside.

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): Part of the barrier to public acceptance of large-scale solar farms comes from a need to see a joined-up approach and that we are balancing food security and energy security. What people want to see—for example, in my constituency with the large proposed Kingsway solar farm—is the much promised land use framework and the strategic spatial energy framework, so that they know where the 0.1% should go and that it is going in the right places, that there is a joined-up approach, and therefore that reasonable people can support it where necessary.

Dr Savage: I am sure we are all waiting with bated breath for the long-awaited land use framework.

The National Farmers Union is well aware that British farmers host about 70% of this country's solar generation capacity, but it is urging the Government to recognise that small-scale energy needs to be prioritised on brownfield sites and lower quality land first. Let us not forget about other nature-based solutions such as rewilding or planting 60 million trees per year. That would not only help to absorb carbon, but restore valuable habitats.

We do need to increase our use of renewables. However, it must be done sympathetically to the environment and should provide, as a priority, community energy to homes, schools and businesses. We have a real opportunity with the land use framework to define our national priorities for the long-term future, emphasising ways of multi-purposing land with ideas like intercropping, living roofs and rooftop solar.

We absolutely need cross-party consensus. The question of meeting future energy needs while not trashing the climate, our countryside or food production is too important to become a political football. The English countryside is currently at risk of being exploited for financial gain by profit-making companies—a corporate wolf dressed in green clothing. We must not allow that to continue unchecked.

11.10 am

The Minister of State, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (Sarah Jones): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond. I congratulate the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) on securing this important debate and the number of interventions she received in such a short period of time reflects the strength of feeling.

Before I set out the Government's approach, I reassure the hon. Lady and her constituents that we agree on most things in this space. We agree that we should be using renewables—whatever they are, wherever they are—in the best way possible. We agree that we need to look at our responsibilities in terms of the climate, agriculture, the countryside and food production. The Government take all those responsibilities very seriously and look them at very carefully. We agree that if we are building solar panels, for example, we should build on brownfield sites first. If we cannot, we should build on areas of lower-quality land first. We agree that food security is enormously important for this country. In the global conditions we find ourselves in, where there is more uncertainty—as we saw with the war in Ukraine and what followed with our energy prices—we need to be mindful of those things. When it comes to the principles, we agree.

I will set out the Government's overall approach to our clean power mission, which might help to put the debate in context. We, like the hon. Member for South Cotswolds, have been clear from the start that the only way to tackle climate change, secure our energy supply, bring down bills and drive economic growth is through clean energy. The rapid deployment of clean energy infrastructure is essential for our future security and economy.

Greg Smith: Is it not the case that the Government are just plumping for the technology that is available right now, in the form of thousands of acres of solar, when we need 2,000 acres of solar panels to produce enough electricity for just 50,000 homes on current usage? A small modular reactor needs just two football pitches for 1 million homes. As I have said many times, why on earth are the Government messing about with solar given its impacts on food security, which the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) mentioned?

Sarah Jones: The previous Government messed around with solar quite a lot—we are building on what the previous Government did, up to a point. The answer is to look at all the technologies that are available to us. SMRs are enormously attractive in lots of different ways, and lots of colleagues have been talking to us about them. As the hon. Gentleman knows, there is a process for the development of SMRs. We need all the tools in our armoury and we need to make sure we are using the most modern technology available. He makes a fair point on that front.

Sustainable power generated here in Britain will reduce our contribution to the damaging effects of climate change and our dependence on the volatile global fossil fuel market. It is already creating thousands of highly skilled jobs and will continue to do so. Instead of delaying the inevitable, we have set ourselves a target to push to clean power by 2030. The clean power action plan, published last month, sets out how we will get there, including the likely technology mix required. It is clear that solar will play a major role.

Richard Fuller (North Bedfordshire) (Con): On the Minister's comments about the Government's announcements in December and the subsequent announcement by the National Energy System Operator about moving forward rapidly with renewable energy, and in relation to East Park Energy, which is a proposal in my constituency whereby 74% of the land used would be best and most versatile land, in neither the December statement nor the January announcement by NESO was there any reference at all to the criterion on use of best and most versatile land. Can the Minister just affirm that that criterion is still used in the assessment of which projects the Government will move forward?

Sarah Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I cannot comment on the individual case in his constituency, of course. But of course when developers are applying for planning permission, they go through a series of criteria and have to adhere to a series of criteria, whether that is for the development of smaller solar plants, where it goes through local authorities, or whether it is through the nationally significant infrastructure project process. The solar taskforce is looking at all these issues as well. We are making sure we are mindful of all of the range of issues that we need

to consider when we are looking at bringing infrastructure into communities. I will come to this later, but it is really important to say that we want to do this with local communities—with consultation of local communities and with consideration of what other options are available to us as well. That will continue.

Solar is one of the cheapest sources of power available to us, which is an important consideration when we are looking at the full range of options that we have between us. We are setting a target for around 45 GW to 47 GW of solar power by 2030. That is up from the 17 GW that we have today and it is a substantial increase.

I want to tackle the issue that a number of Members mentioned—the rooftop versus ground-mount issue. The hon. Member for South Cotswolds is right to talk about how we need to be going further to make sure we are putting solar panels on our roofs, and to ask what Government can do to encourage that. We are bringing in new building standards to ensure that all newly built houses and commercial buildings are fit for a net zero future. We expect those standards to encourage the installation of solar panels on new developments. We are issuing later this year a call for evidence on the construction of solar on outdoor car parks. The reconvened solar taskforce is focusing on rooftop solar, and further actions to increase deployment will be set out in the road map this spring.

I was talking to one of our big mayoral authorities yesterday about the power purchase agreements that people could potentially have in this space. If people look at public sector roofs and the collaboration they could have across some of our transport infrastructure and some of our public sector infrastructure, they could do more ambitious projects when it comes to solar, and of course we want to push that as much as we can. If we can put solar panels on rooftops, that is what we want to do. But we consider that we need a mix of both: we need ground-mounted and rooftop panels to get to the numbers that we want to see.

Let me turn to the planning system. All proposed solar projects are subject to a rigorous planning process, which considers the interests of local communities, as I said to the hon. Member for North Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller).

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): In my constituency of Huntingdon, a new solar farm of 1,900 acres is proposed. It spans from my constituency across into North Bedfordshire, which my hon. Friend the Member for North Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller) represents. The local population have spent a lot of time liaising with both me and my hon. Friend with regard to the impact that it will have and the lack of consultation that they have experienced. They have been told that realistically, they will receive no real benefit from the solar farm's being there. They will certainly not receive directly cheaper energy bills for having it built right on their doorstep. What would the Minister say to those constituents, and the constituents of the other Members in this room, who are in effect having nationally significant infrastructure projects foisted on them and who do not feel that they have a say or any real ability to push back on that?

Sarah Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He expresses a concern that local Members of Parliament will always have when constituents come

[Sarah Jones]

to them with issues. Look, we are balancing an issue when it comes to solar. At the moment, about 0.1% of all our land in the UK—and, it turns out, about 0.1% of all agricultural land as a proportion as well—has solar on it. Even if we were to reach our targets or go beyond them, it would still be less than 1% of land. We have to look at that statistic, but we also have to look at the local situation, which is where we absolutely accept that we are asking people to have infrastructure in their communities that will affect them. It could change their view, change their roles or change the jobs that are available; it has an impact. Through our clean power action plan, we are looking at the community benefit systems that we need to put in place. I cannot speak to the hon. Gentleman's particular case because it is going through a process and it would not be right for me to do so, but I am mindful of what he says about the need for communities to feel like they will have some direct benefits and to understand why we need some of this infrastructure.

The reality is that we have not kept up to speed with infrastructure developments in this country over the past couple of decades, and we need to move faster. Whether it is our grid system, renewable energy or our transport systems, we need to build these things for our children and grandchildren to have the future that we want to see. Of course we need to be mindful of the impact and how local people feel. That is why, for the nationally significant infrastructure projects, there is still consultation and strong engagement with communities. That needs to get better, and we are looking at that through our clean power action plan.

I am mindful of the time. I want to move on to food security, which the hon. Member for South Cotswolds mentioned. Food security is national security, and it is very important for this Government. We need a resilient and healthy food system that works with nature and supports British farmers, fishers and food producers. That is why the Government will introduce a new deal for farmers to boost rural economic growth and strengthen Britain's food security.

Tim Farron: The Minister is being very generous; I am grateful. The concern is that farmers are often pushed into things that they would not choose initially—such as giving over productive agricultural land for stuff that is not food production. Because of the perversity of Government funding changes, perhaps the most egregious thing in the Budget was the 76% cut in the basic payment for farmers this year, which will make many of them feel that their hand is forced to go down a direction that they do not want to go down. Might the Minister have a word with the Treasury to see whether that cut could be taken away?

Sarah Jones: I hear the hon. Gentleman's point. The wider point about farmers being pushed according to EU or local subsidies over the years is of course right, and we need to get the balance right. I will speak to the numbers again: we are looking to go from 17 GW to around 45 GW, which is a trebling of the current land use of 0.1%. We are talking about small numbers, although I appreciate that in some constituencies, such as that of the hon. Member for South Cotswolds, it will feel much bigger because there are more of these products coming along.

Of course we need to get our system right for farmers. I am a Member of Parliament in Croydon, where we do not have many farmers, but I am incredibly grateful to them for their role and the work that they do, and we need to make sure that we support them. Where it is necessary to develop agricultural land—and we need to start with the basics of using other land first where we can—we do not think it will have any significant impact on food security because of the numbers: less than 1% of the UK's agricultural land will be occupied by solar farms. We do not believe that will have an impact on our food security.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): Will the Minister give way?

Sarah Jones: I will finish my point, because it is connected to the point made by the hon. Member for South Cotswolds. The biggest threat to British farmers in the countryside is not solar farms; it is the impact of climate change, and we are already seeing the effects in the floods and droughts that are threatening their livelihoods. We have to be mindful of that when we are trying to tackle climate change and increase the use of solar.

Adrian Ramsay: I appreciate the principles that the Minister is setting out, particularly on the impact of climate change on food security. Every model of net zero energy that I have seen includes a greater role for renewable energy on land, but is there not a risk that without a clear land use strategy that shows how we will achieve a resilient food supply while meeting net zero targets, decisions about where solar farms are located will end up getting made on a piecemeal basis, rather than the basis that the Minister is setting out?

Sarah Jones: The hon. Gentleman has predicted that I was about to talk about the land use framework. He is right. The Government recognise that England has limited land, and the use demands on it include our vital clean energy infrastructure. The Government will deliver our manifesto commitment by introducing a land use framework so that we can consider how to balance competing demands and transform how we use land. That will support economic growth and deliver on the plan for change that the Prime Minister outlined last month. The framework will work hand in hand with the strategic spatial energy plan, which we have commissioned the National Energy System Operator to devise. The hon. Gentleman is right that we have to understand the whole before we make piecemeal decisions, and our criticism of the previous Government is that those overarching plans were lacking.

Pippa Heylings: On that point, would it therefore be right to consider not overruling the Planning Inspectorate just now, in the build-up to receiving the land use framework and the strategic spatial energy plan from NESO, before making these big infrastructure decisions? We would take the public with us if they understood that we will decide where solar farms go once we have the land use framework and the strategic spatial energy plan.

Sarah Jones: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. We already have a planning system that enables us to look at individual projects. The new Government will

set those strategic frameworks, but we have to allow the legal processes to continue while we do that. We will see an increase in the push to 2030 and beyond that. We want to see, through good government, a proper national framework that puts these issues in place.

I want to touch again on the community benefits, which hon. Members have raised. I cannot stress enough that communities hosting clean energy infrastructure are doing a service to our country, and they need to benefit from that. It could be argued that we will all benefit in the long term as energy prices come down and we have more energy security, but there are many ways that communities can directly benefit, including through community funds, direct payments and community ownership. We are exploring all the options, and we will have more to say about that soon. In the meantime, Great British Energy will support community energy schemes, helping communities to unlock opportunities through the local power plan, which will support local authorities, community energy groups and others to deliver small and medium-scale renewable energy projects. It could develop up to 8 GW of clean power by 2030.

I thank the hon. Member for South Cotswolds for securing the debate, and other hon. Members for their very thoughtful interventions. The Government remain committed to balancing the urgent need for renewable electricity with considerations of land use, food production and community benefit. We want to take people with us on this journey, which will see us going into the future with a mix of renewable energy that delivers the lower prices that we all want to see.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

Agricultural Property Relief

[GRAHAM STRINGER *in the Chair*]

[*Relevant document: e-petition 700138, Don't change inheritance tax relief for working farms.*]

2.30 pm

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of changes to Agricultural Property Relief.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interest as a tenant dairy farmer. In Wales, 80% of our land is given over to farming, and our food foundation sector—including businesses that produce, process, manufacture and wholesale food and drink goods—is a vital part of our economy, hitting a turnover of £9.3 billion in 2023. In fact, Cabinet Ministers in the Labour Welsh Government have lauded Wales as a “food nation”, but the UK Government's decision in the autumn Budget to change the agricultural property relief and business property relief will have a real effect on food, sustainable food production and food security in Wales.

Business property relief and agricultural property relief were introduced in the 1970s and the 1980s respectively to ensure that a farm or family business could continue trading after the owner's death, protecting it from being sold and broken up. However, on 30 October 2024, the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that the Labour UK Government intend to change APR and BPR conditions from 6 April 2026. From that date, 100% relief from inheritance tax will be restricted to the first £1 million of combined agricultural and business property, and 50% thereafter. The proposals equate to landowners paying inheritance tax at a rate of 20% of estate value, with the threshold from which they pay being dependent on individual circumstances. That tax is payable in instalments over 10 years without interest.

Combining APR and BPR under those changes means that the asset value of the tools and the machinery necessary to operate a farming business are affected, as well as the agricultural land and property, alongside any diversification activities that the UK Government have told farmers to explore to increase their income. The UK Government contend that those changes will affect around 500 estates a year, and that small family farms will not be affected, but organisations within the agricultural sector say otherwise.

The National Farmers Union calculated that 75% of commercial family farms will fall above the £1 million threshold across the UK. The Farmers' Union of Wales, using other figures, estimated that essentially all farms that produce nearly 90% of agricultural output in Wales could be liable under the changes. In fact, Eirian Humphreys of LHP Accountants, a large accountancy firm across south and west Wales, told me that of the 51 farming clients who have inquired about those changes so far, 46—around 90%—will have to pay inheritance tax if they die after 6 April 2026.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing this matter before the House again. On the subject of the 500 estates, can we all agree that that only relates to the number of estates that claim under APR? It does not take account

[Mr Alistair Carmichael]

of the effect of APR and BPR together. In fact, BPR valuations are taken at book value, not at market value, so the number of estates that are liable must inevitably be massively greater than 500.

Ann Davies: Absolutely. We all know that is the case.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell)
indicated dissent.

Mr Carmichael: The Minister is shaking his head. I wonder whether the hon. Lady would join me in inviting him to intervene to explain why that fact is wrong.

Ann Davies: I do not know whether the Minister would like to do so now or at the end. It is up to him.

Torsten Bell: I will at some length explain why the remarks that the right hon. Gentleman just made—

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. If Members wish to make an intervention, they should stand to do so. It is up to the person who is speaking whether to accept an intervention.

I was going to say this at the end of Ann Davies's speech, but I will say it now. This debate is oversubscribed, so I will put a time limit on speeches. Members should make short interventions, because interventions will mean less time for those people who have put in to speak.

Ann Davies: Of the clients that Eirian mentioned, five of them will not come under the tax liability because they have very small farms with off-farm income, they have transferred their farms following ill health, or they have significant debt that offsets the value of their farms.

It is clear that the assessments of the impact of the changes on working farms across the UK, on the wider economy and on the wider food supply chain are inadequate. The data that we have is deficient; it includes smallholdings and non-working farms. Data based on the basic payment scheme or on agricultural output would provide a fairer representation of the situation for genuine farmers.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The hon. Lady is speaking remarkably well about the challenges that this Government policy will create for farmers in Wales, in Scotland and across the UK. Research by Scottish Land and Estates shows that the average UK farm size is 217 acres and the average agricultural land value in Great Britain is £8,200 per acre, which means that the average working farm in the UK is worth about £1.8 million. Does that not show the flaw in the Government's argument? This policy is not attacking the richest landowners; it is attacking working farms the length and breadth of the UK.

Ann Davies: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and I totally agree. Indeed, I will give further details about that issue later in my speech.

It is also clear that industry experts were not consulted on the changes prior to the announcement, even though consultation could have led to a fairer and more appropriate solution that is not detrimental to family farms or the wider industry.

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): The hon. Lady is making a very passionate speech on an extremely important topic. She will know that my constituency of Chester South and Eddisbury borders Wales, and that there are many family farmers in north Wales who are deeply concerned about the consequences of this policy. Does she agree that it will impact not only farmers but the wider agricultural-industrial community, including businesses in my constituency that work alongside Welsh farmers in north Wales, such as Meadow Foods in Chester?

Ann Davies: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady, and perhaps I should mention that Meadow Foods is the company that takes the milk from our farm—so we are that close to one another. I will say more about that issue as I move through my speech.

The lack of any data on the particular effects of the changes in Wales is a genuine problem. The available data, especially the data used by the Treasury, is a combination of Wales data and England data, or is UK-level data; it is not Welsh data. That is why organisations in Wales have to make their own calculations about the impact in Wales. The Country Land and Business Association calculated that an average 250-acre dairy farm in Wales could be hit by a £119,000 inheritance tax charge, while the average 250-acre livestock farm would expect an £85,000 charge. However, those figures do not include the asset value of diversified enterprise, meaning, of course, that they could be higher still.

It is crucial that farmers, policymakers and other stakeholders in Wales have accurate data to understand the real impacts of the changes within the specific context of Wales. The FUW called for the Wales-specific impact assessment to be modelled with working farms only, as the Welsh Government—the Welsh Labour Government—did during their 2023 sustainable farming scheme analysis. Today, I reiterate the call for the Government to implement that assessment, as my Plaid Cymru colleagues and I have continuously called for since October. The arguments have not changed.

There is evidence that the changes will not make even an iota of difference to the Treasury. In fact, modelling from the Confederation of British Industry Economics found that the changes to BPR will actually cost the Exchequer £1.25 billion between 2026-27 and 2029-30. It is unclear how they work towards Labour's mission of growth, as industry organisations have come across numerous cases of farms and businesses delaying investments, putting orders on hold and preparing to reduce staffing. Let us not forget that each £1 a farmer spends generates another £9 in that community. What other rural industry does that?

Undermining local farmers and agricultural producers risks missing out on crucial opportunities to shorten our supply chains and to improve our food resilience. We currently produce 60% of the food that we need here in the UK and, when our food imports already outnumber exports by £33.2 billion, causing a reduction in the food that we produce will only increase our vulnerability to factors outside our control—the damaging consequences of which we have already felt in the energy market.

There is also a consensus that the changes do not address the initial concerns about non-farmers investing in land to avoid inheritance tax. For those with new money from capital gains made in the non-agricultural

economy, there will continue to be a huge incentive to buy agricultural land, given that the value of that land above the announced threshold will face inheritance tax charges at half the rate of other assets.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): The hon. Lady is making an excellent speech. Does she agree that, if the Treasury had considered increasing the threshold and raising the overall rate for very wealthy landowners to 40%, it might have achieved the outcome it was looking for? I put on record that I would not have gone down the route that it has anyway.

Ann Davies: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. I am coming on to solutions in a minute; I hope that the Minister will listen to my proposed options.

Extending the existing scope of APR to land managed under environmental agreements with or on behalf of, for example, the Government or public bodies also suggests that foundations and large companies could buy up land sold to pay inheritance tax, without being subject to it in the same way. We have a train of people in west Wales who are already buying land for planting trees, carbon offsetting and solar and wind farms.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I find the notion of people buying and selling land purely for fiscal purposes abhorrent. I come from a farming family. My father was broke. He had to sell most of the land. There is not a day that goes by in which I do not look at the fields and regret that my family parted with it. The point I am making is that there is an emotional attachment between the farming family and the land. That is quite different from buying or selling a house, shares or a holiday home in Spain—it is quite different.

Ann Davies: As someone who has lived and worked the land all my life, I totally agree with the hon. Member. It is something that is within our soul; it is not just a trading issue.

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): I commend the hon. Lady on her excellent speech. Given that we are asking farmers, who are already under so much emotional and financial pressure, to be even more active participants in helping us to mitigate climate change and restore nature, does she agree that it is not the time to add to their stress and risk losing their deep knowledge of their land, which has been passed from generation to generation?

Ann Davies: I totally agree. Nobody understands those fields better than the farmer who has worked that land. They know where those wet corners are and they know where they should not tread during certain times. The sustainable farming scheme—the SFS—is coming out in Wales next year, and it is about nature restoration, so I absolutely agree.

Estate agents in west Wales are already seeing increased investor interest in purchasing farms following the autumn Budget. Selling land to pay an inheritance tax bill will inevitably hit tenant farmers because the £1 million threshold will hit asset-rich estates. Around 30% of land in Wales is farmed under some sort of tenancy agreement and, although some is local authority-owned, much

is owned by private landlords. The Tenant Farmers Association anticipates that more insecure agricultural tenancies will be terminated to allow land to be sold to avoid taxes on death. Other landlords are reducing the lengths of term offered to tenants, who were expecting longer leases, so that farms are more readily sellable in case of tax change.

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): Tenant farmers on Ynys Môn are expected to be impacted by the change to APR because landowners there will have no option but to sell their farms to cover the additional cost. The landowners have a good relationship with their tenants but they have no choice but to sell, leaving generational farmers to lose their homes, businesses and future, with long-lasting effects on the rural community. Does my hon. Friend agree that the realities of agriculture in Wales, including for tenant farmers, must be fully considered by the UK Government in a Wales-specific impact assessment?

Ann Davies: Diolch yn fawr. I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I should add that the wider economy will lose another vital source of food production. If that land is taken, it will never go back into food production.

My hon. Friend mentioned the effect on Wales, and there is a knock-on effect on the Welsh language: 43% of those involved in agriculture in Wales speak Welsh. Keeping our farming communities alive is key to moving towards the Welsh Labour Government's target of achieving 1 million Welsh speakers in 2050. There is real worry—farming constituents have told me, with an eye on what it means for their own children, that they are concerned about the impact of the changes on future food production by Welsh-speaking families in areas of Wales already facing depopulation.

The families behind farming businesses are important to this debate. They are not just figures; they are people—people such as Richard Twose of Maenhir, who runs a 700-acre farm of 400 Holstein dairy cows and 300 pedigree Lleyn ewes with his parents, brother and children. APR and BPR changes have blown apart the family's succession plans. They may now be forced to transfer the parents' share in the farm and hope that they live for another seven years, or else the family will face a big tax burden on top of their business debt. Just yesterday I heard that, to add to the family's worries and concerns, Richard's father had passed away suddenly over Christmas.

The APR and BPR changes do not appear proportionate, in many ways. Inflation has already eroded the nil rate tax band of £325,000, which has been frozen since 2009 and is set to remain frozen until 2030. When APR and BPR were introduced, the nil rate band covered 56 acres of farmland; today, it covers 29 acres.

How the changes apply is not fair because the particularities—who someone shares the farm with, which tools or machinery they own or have hired, how much business debt they have—have a direct impact on their inheritance tax bill. Although the Government have said that married couples and their descendants can benefit from up to £3 million in tax relief, in reality tax experts are quoting figures that vary between £2 million and £4 million, based on different scenarios. We must remember that the Chancellor stated in October that the starting point for calculations is £1 million.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): Diolch yn fawr—thank you—to the hon. Member for giving way. Farmers in my constituency say to me that their problem is the threshold. The on-paper values of their farms—often several million pounds, even if the farmer makes no actual surplus income from the farm—would take them well into being caught by this policy. But the current situation is not working either, because non-farmers bought up more than half the farms and estates sold on the open market in England in 2023.

One local farmer told me that a 350-acre farm in Suffolk was bought by a merchant banker from London who had not even seen the farm and was clearly not intent on farming. Does the hon. Member agree that although we need the Government to increase the threshold, those arguing for the status quo are not doing farmers justice either?

Ann Davies: Absolutely. I am coming to my solutions, so I hope the Treasury will listen. I have three solutions that I think would work, because there are alternatives to this policy. The first is that abolishing capital business asset rollover relief could have provided a more targeted measure to tackle wealthy individuals buying agricultural land to avoid tax. That is the big one.

Secondly, taxing assets at the point of selling, rather than at the point of passing to another generation, would be a fairer measure to keep family farms. Thirdly, modifying existing proposals could double the zero-rate band and significantly increase the threshold, while allowing a shorter period than seven years for potentially exempt transfers. I have an additional comment on that. Do any of us have the right to live for seven years? That, my friends, is really not within our gift. Those are a few solutions from expert organisations in the sector, which could have proposed their solutions before the Government made their decision. That underlines again the importance of proper consultation with stakeholders.

To sum up, the APR and BPR changes have come at an already difficult time for farmers, with high costs of production, adverse weather and marketplace volatility taking their toll. Working farms that have been at the heart of Welsh communities for generations will suffer. As a constituent told me,

“Every farmer deserves the right to security of the farm they own or rent.”

Farms are not businesses but family legacies, vital for our rural economy and key to preserving our Welsh-speaking culture. Plaid Cymru supports closing loopholes that allow billionaire landowners to avoid paying their fair share, but this one-size-fits-all approach ignores the unique challenges of Welsh farming. That is why it is so important that the UK Government implement a Wales-specific impact assessment that reflects the realities of agriculture in Wales.

A petition calling for the UK Government not to change inheritance tax relief for working farms has reached more than 146,000 signatories, and is being debated here on 10 February—put that in the diary, folks! It is clear that the public agree that it is time for the Government to listen to farmers, conduct a proper analysis and rethink this damaging policy before it is too late.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. I remind hon. Members that they should bob if they wish to be called. The debate is well subscribed, so I am going to start with a four-minute limit. If there are a lot of interventions, that time will have to be reduced.

2.53 pm

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin (Ann Davies) on securing this important debate about a topic of major concern for many of my constituents.

Farming is at the heart of Wales’s social fabric, playing a vital role in our economy, food security and stewardship of the beautiful Welsh countryside. On Saturday, I met representatives of the FUW in Llansilin and NFU Cymru at a farm in Llanerfyl to discuss the ongoing challenges that farmers face. Farming is currently the least profitable sector of our economy, and changes to APR are having a significant impact on family-run farms.

A lifelong farmer in my constituency raised her children on her 220-acre farm. Although considered small, the farm is valued at more than £1 million. Her 48-year-old son, who has farmed alongside her since the age of 18, had hoped to take over the farm. His young daughters now share his passion. Sadly, they now face the prospect of losing the farm they have worked so hard for.

Let me be clear. I support progressive taxation to ensure that the wealthiest pay their fair share towards the upkeep of our society. In the 21st century, we see individual plutocrats and super-wealthy multinationals buying agricultural land to avoid paying inheritance tax, with no intention of using it for farming. That reduces our farmed land—something we can ill afford, given our fast-growing population in an unstable world.

The proposed changes to APR for farmers come on the back of this and more, and feel like the straw that broke the camel’s back, or as we would say in Wales: “Yr hoelen olaf yn yr arch.—[*Translation: The final nail in the coffin.*]

—if the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin can forgive my north-east Wales accent. The changes risk having a deeply detrimental effect on working family farms. What is at stake here? Food security. I have repeatedly spoken in the Chamber about my heartbreaking experiences with hungry children and food banks. In recent years, we have seen something that many never thought they would witness: food scarcity, empty shelves in the supermarkets and astronomical food price inflation. It cannot be overstated how that period of food inflation has affected the poorest in our country.

I will not say more about the proposed APR policy as a whole. Prior to my election in July, I attended 10 hustings—we do like our hustings in mid-Wales; my thoughts on this topic are well-known and on the record. However, I will speak about mitigations. First, I respectfully request that the Minister considers raising the threshold. If this policy is to target those who buy farmland solely to dodge inheritance tax, then let us make it so: raise the threshold and actually increase the rate for people like that, so that no family farm is affected.

Secondly, I implore the Minister to look at an exemption for farmers who—I risk sounding macabre, but I want to make myself clear—are too late in life to plan for this proposed change. I hope the Minister and you, Mr Stringer,

can forgive my emotion. When you sit with an elderly farmer and his wife, both fighting back the tears, and they say, “If only I could die now, if only there was some kind of pill I could take now, so that my children don’t have to worry about this,” that has a profound effect. Diolch.

2.57 pm

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin (Ann Davies) for securing this important debate. I agree with her and the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) about emotional attachment; I urge hon. Members to watch “The Field” with Richard Harris—his Oscar-winning performance.

I want to return to the point that I have made in previous debates and which has already been made by the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr. The key issue is that food security is national security; we as MPs have a duty to ensure that and to deliver jobs for communities across the country and low prices for consumers. Yet the Government behave as if they think food appears magically on the shelves at supermarkets.

My constituency of Aberdeenshire North and Moray East holds some of the best agricultural farmland in the country, and it will be disproportionately impacted by this change. Three quarters of the land in my constituency is used for agriculture, and the people who work that land are incredibly worried. Personally, I would have sympathy with a policy that targeted wealthy individuals who purchase agricultural land as a means of avoiding inheritance tax. However, that will not be the sole consequence of this legislation—that is the crucial point.

After the Chancellor delivered her Budget speech last year, the NFU and the National Farmers Union Scotland immediately cast doubt on the revenue that the policy would actually raise; they were ignored and dismissed. Now, even the Office for Budget Responsibility—Labour appear quick to mention it, but then ignore when it suits—has cast doubt on the revenue that the policy would raise. It states that the Treasury figure of £500 million is now highly uncertain. The justification for the policy is falling apart.

Since we last met on this issue, almost every major supermarket chain in the UK has publicly backed farmers, urging the Government to halt their plans and carry out a consultation. Ashwin Prasad, Tesco’s chief commercial officer, said there must be a pause in the Government’s implementation of the Budget measures, while a full consultation is carried out.

Farmers recognise Labour’s APR change as a bad decision; now the UK’s leading supermarkets have confirmed it. We must not forget that Labour brought in this change after explicitly ruling it out. Long-term clarity is needed when it comes to planning the future of family farms and the UK Government have failed farmers on that point. Listening to the NFUS and the NFU on this issue would have saved a lot of hurt for farmers, rural communities and shoppers across the country.

I have heard time and again from the Government that this policy was necessary to tackle the difficult financial situation that they inherited from the previous Government. I do not see how a bad inheritance justifies an objectively bad policy for consumers and farmers. If the necessity was so, why did the Chancellor rush to Davos to offer tax reliefs to non-doms, why is she not

tackling widespread tax evasion by prominent individuals, as was reported recently by the BBC, and why is she not considering a wealth tax?

It seems ironic that the Labour Government complain about their dire inheritance while ignoring the dire inheritance that they are inflicting on family farms throughout the UK. It is not too late for the UK Government to reassess this damaging policy and make the necessary changes to protect farmers across these islands and in my constituency. It is a bad policy, Minister, and it is time to rethink it.

3 pm

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Reform): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin (Ann Davies) on securing such a valuable debate.

Being a farmer is not job; it is a career. In fact, it is not a career; it is a way of life. As one of the few active farming MPs, I am more qualified than most to comment. We were told before the election that Labour had no intention of changing APR, and farmers would have voted for Labour specifically on that pledge from the Environment Secretary. They certainly would not now. We should call it what it is: an outright betrayal.

Where do people think our food comes from? It does not grow on shelves in Waitrose; it is grown by British farmers on British farms. I urge all MPs to speak to their farming constituents. They will all say exactly the same: the backbone of British farming is being intentionally broken. If Labour continues down this path, thousands of grieving British farming families will lose their farms forever. Is that really what the Government want? The answer seems to be yes.

This assault on British family farms will undermine our food security, making our already uncertain place in an increasingly dangerous world even more precarious. Supporting British farmers today means safeguarding our domestic food supply for tomorrow. That should be the aim of any responsible Government. A rethink of this policy is urgently required.

3.2 pm

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): It is starting to feel a bit like groundhog day, because the Government are clearly not listening to the entire agricultural economy, community or experts. Let us go back to the beginning and have a brief history lesson. The hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe) just mentioned that the Government said prior to the election that they had no intention of changing APR. At the Budget, the Chancellor told us that this was a measure to prevent very wealthy individuals from buying up agricultural land to avoid inheritance tax. That was proven by analysis of the policy to be untrue, so there was a pivot and we were told that the measure was about raising revenue for public services in rural areas. Then the OBR said, “Well, actually, it’s not going to raise the revenue it says it’s going to raise,” so the whole thing has unravelled week after week.

We have heard from other hon. Members today about the issue of the APR analysis not taking into account the BPR effect, and what that does for tenant farmers and farmers who have used BPR as one vehicle to wrap everything into in the event of a death. We have farmers, agricultural organisations, supermarkets, tax experts—even

[Charlie Dewhurst]

The Observer this weekend—coming out against the policy. It is truly remarkable that the Government have managed to unite all those people against one single measure.

Today, quite significantly, we had analysis from the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board. That is important, because the AHDB is a non-departmental Government body, not a lobbying organisation. Its analysis, using data from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the farm business survey and the Scottish Government, says that over 75% of farms will be affected by this measure—three times the amount that the flawed Treasury modelling said.

Most of those farms simply cannot afford a large inheritance tax bill because, as we all know, they do not have the income to pay it. The result will be the sale of land upon death, most likely to the wealthy individuals or businesses that this very policy was allegedly meant to deter. In turn, that will take land out of production, risking both our food security and local agricultural economies. My hon. Friend the Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) made a really important point about the impact on construction firms, feed merchants, hauliers, plumbers, electricians—all those who rely on a healthy farming sector.

The Government have ploughed on, with their head in the sand, but at what cost? There is a political cost—the decimation of Labour's reputation in the countryside—but, more importantly, there is a human cost. This measure has placed enormous stress on family farms and, unforgivably, we have heard stories of suicide.

If the Chancellor can look again at non-doms, she can look again at this policy. If the Treasury is seeking to deter the wealthy from buying agricultural land, let us look at this again. If it is seeking to raise revenue, let us look at this again. The farmers are not going to back down, and we are not going to back down, so let us do the right thing, get round the table and find a better way forward.

3.5 pm

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I commend the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin (Ann Davies) for bringing forward this debate. She is a real advocate for farmers, and her constituents will have noted that.

As has been said, farming is not just a job, but a way of life. It is a generational commitment. In rural Northern Ireland, including in my constituency of Upper Bann, despite the recent inclement weather, rising production costs and the very real concerns of avian flu, bluetongue and the affliction of tuberculosis, our farmers continue to toil away. As we stand here today, they are milking cows and feeding livestock. They are working the land and ultimately feeding the nation. Farmers take great pride in their work, with zero days off and low incomes, and they bear the immense responsibility of being the custodians of our countryside and the lifeblood of our rural communities. Schools, businesses and essential services depend on them.

Jamie Stone: I sincerely hope that I am wrong in what I am about to suggest, but if the value of land were to drop as a result of these measures, and a farm had

borrowed heavily and owed the bank a lot, it could be the case that the bank would foreclose and force the sale of the farm.

Carla Lockhart: The hon. Member is not wrong—he is rarely wrong. That the policy could lead to the splitting up of family farms is a concern for many farming families across Northern Ireland and this United Kingdom.

Agriculture has long been and continues to be the backbone of the UK economy. The agrifood sector contributes significantly to our GDP and employs hundreds of thousands of people across the country, yet, despite their crucial contribution, farmers face ever-increasing pressures that are not of their making.

Farming is deeply personal for me: I was raised on a farm, I am the daughter of a farmer, I am the wife of a farmer and, as I have said in this place before, I am the proud mum of a little boy who aspires to be a family farmer. He also dreams of being a professional footballer, but we will talk about that another day. So when I speak of farming, it really cuts deep, and it is from my heart that I bring the Government the simple but urgent message that they continue down this path at their peril. The proposed tax changes are a heavy blow to those who are already struggling, and they will be a wrecking ball to our rural communities and rural way of life across this United Kingdom. They will undermine our food security, drive up prices and undermine the world-class environmental standards that British farmers adhere to day and daily.

The changes to agricultural property relief and business property relief fly in the face of the manifesto commitments of this Government. Prior to the general election, the Prime Minister told farmers what they wanted to hear. It feels very much like “you’ve threw them under the bus,” as we would say in Northern Ireland, for little monetary return for the Government coffers. He said:

“Losing a farm is not like losing any other business, you can’t come back... You deserve better than that.”

Those words came from the Prime Minister's mouth, and they ring very hollow in our rural community.

The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in Northern Ireland has done a deep dive into the figures, which clearly outline the significant and disproportionate impact that the changes will have on Northern Ireland's agricultural sector. DAERA's analysis has shown that the vast majority of farms will be affected. In fact, under the current land valuation of £21,000 per acre in Northern Ireland, approximately 40% to 45% of cattle and sheep farms will be impacted, and an astounding 87% of dairy farms will be caught by the tax. It is not a marginal impact; it will affect almost half of farms in Northern Ireland, which together account for 80% of the total agricultural land, 70% of beef cattle, 90% of dairy cows and 80% of all cattle. The proposed changes will disrupt the very heart of our agricultural output. Sadly, that situation is replicated across the whole of the UK.

Despite all the evidence and concerns, the UK Government continue to state that only 500 farmers will be impacted by the changes. The official figures from the Office for Budget Responsibility remain highly uncertain. In fact, the OBR itself acknowledged that the estimates are among the most uncertain in the entire Budget package. According to independent analysis,

the true number of affected farmers is likely to be five times greater than the Government's estimate. I have made this point repeatedly in this place: no farmers, no food.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. I call Jim Shannon.

3.11 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On a point of clarification, Mr Stringer, I understand that the Front-Bench speeches will begin at 3.28 pm. Does that mean that the hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour) and myself can divide the 17 minutes until then between ourselves?

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): On the time limit that I have set, if people took the four minutes, we would finish the Back-Bench speeches at 3.19 pm. One of the problems is that some people have put in to speak but are not standing. That made the calculation difficult, because I assumed that people who had put in to speak would be bobbing, and they have not. At the moment, I will go with the four minutes that we have agreed.

Jim Shannon: Thank you for that clarification, Mr Stringer. I did not intend to put you under any pressure. I wish you well and thank you for your chairship.

I thank the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin (Ann Davies)—I hope my pronunciation is right, with my Ulster Scots accent—for securing this important debate on a matter of grave concern for many constituents and communities across the United Kingdom, and for those that I proudly represent as the Member of Parliament for Strangford. I declare an interest as a member of the Ulster Farmers' Union, a farmer and a landowner. All my neighbours—every one of them—are concerned about this issue, and they have expressed that to me very clearly.

Farmers are the backbone of our rural economy. Their work provides not only the food that graces our tables but the stewardship of our natural landscapes, which are an integral part of our cultural and environmental heritage. Yet the changes to APR threaten to destabilise that foundation. I have spoken to farmers in my constituency and beyond, and their message is clear: the changes will place a substantial financial burden on farming families, forcing many to sell land to cover tax liabilities.

In response to a survey by the Country Land and Business Association, 86% of farmers indicated that they would need to sell all or part of their land if APR were removed. I understand that approximately 70% of farms in Northern Ireland—that comes from the Ulster Farmers' Union legal officer—will be affected, because the farms are smaller.

It is really important that we get this right. Farmers have faced unrelenting challenges in recent years, including soaring energy and fertiliser costs, unpredictable weather patterns and inflationary pressures. The past decade has been marked by uncertainty. The loss of APR would mean that future generations could face unsurmountable inheritance tax. For smaller farms, especially, that could spell the end of their viability. The reality is that the changes will sweep up in their net many genuine, hard-working family farms. It is not just a financial issue; it is a matter of fairness, community sustainability and food security.

The Minister is an honourable person, but let us be honest and reasonable: what is right and what is wrong? Justice is what we are looking for here, and that must be addressed. When global supply chains are increasingly fragile, it is unwise to undermine domestic food production. Every acre lost to inheritance tax obligations reduces our ability to feed our population sustainably and affordably.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): Clearly, many Members on both sides of the Chamber are incredibly concerned by the Government's proposals to cut agricultural property relief and business property relief. Farmers from my constituency came to see me and they are incredibly worried. In an area with high land values but relatively small farms, they think that they will lose their farms. Does the hon. Member agree that, as well as having a global impact, losing those farms will be incredibly detrimental to the rural economy—to veterinary practices, agricultural merchants and other businesses attached to farming?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. With those wise words, she has hit the nail on the head. When the Minister looks round this Chamber, he will see that everybody—those who have spoken and those who are here—is united against the change to APR. We are not going to put the Minister under pressure unduly, but if it were me, I would think twice about getting into a fight where it was 27 to one.

Jamie Stone: The hon. Member will be aware that my wife's family come from Northern Ireland. My understanding is that the price of land there is quite a lot higher per acre than in Scotland or England. Does that not mean that what we are talking about today has a disproportionate effect on the Province of Northern Ireland?

Jim Shannon: It certainly does. For the Minister, we will lay on the line what we are after. The £1 million threshold is wrong, because it does not adequately reflect the rateable value of a farm. If the threshold was £5 million, that would save the small farms. The hon. Member for Caerfyrddin, who introduced the debate, talked about solutions. I have a solution for the Labour party, and I do not care if the Labour party claims it—that does not matter to me. What matters to me is that the threshold should rise from £1 million to £5 million. If it does, family farms will be saved, and if they are saved, we have a chance of moving forward.

I am trying to put that forward to the Minister as a positive solution. With the Ulster Farmers Union representatives William Irvine and Alex Kinnear, I had a meeting with the Minister away back before Christmas. We put that solution to him, and he said that he would take it to the Chancellor, because ultimately it will be her decision. It is a really clear way forward.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) is right in what he says about Northern Ireland. Land values are more expensive in Northern Ireland than anywhere else, which is why the 70% figure is greater for Northern Ireland than anywhere else. We want to have the same mechanism for everybody across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but there are other ideas about mechanisms such as extended payment windows or graduated tax liabilities to alleviate the financial strain on small farms.

[Jim Shannon]

I urge the Minister to provide clarity and reassurance to farmers, who are deeply concerned about the future. Again, I say this to him: if we want to do something positive following this debate—as I think we can and must—the issue of the threshold is the way forward. When people add up the value of the land, the value of the machinery and the value of the stock, they are well over the £1 million threshold, but what if he made the threshold £5 million? I have not grasped that figure out of the air; the Ulster Farmers Union and the National Farmers Union put it forward as a figure that could address the issue.

I am not going to put a lot of pressure on the Minister today—well, actually, I am. We are all putting pressure on him, because we see a way forward—genuinely, constructively and positively. I beseech him to take that message from the debate today to increase the threshold and save family farms.

This is an issue across Northern Ireland, including in the constituencies that my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) and I represent. All my neighbours are worried sick about what the future holds, as are those tenant farmers in Wales and Scotland—across this great United Kingdom. We need the threshold to be raised. If the Minister does that, we will be on his side.

3.19 pm

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. First and foremost, I congratulate the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin (Ann Davies) on securing this vital debate. Right hon. and hon. Members will perhaps be sick of hearing me talk on this topic, but I feel compelled to provide a voice for my farmers. My constituency of Tiverton and Minehead has a similar make-up to the hon. Lady's. It is overwhelmingly rural agricultural land and home to many farming communities. There are some 1,600 holdings according to the CLA and 432 of those farms will be hit by the Government's APR changes.

We Liberal Democrats applaud our farmers. As a former director of the National Farmers Union, I feel well placed to highlight the damaging consequences that will inevitably be visited upon them as a result of the changes to agricultural property relief. The Government's claim that 27% of all farms will be affected is, if I am being generous, misinformed. According to in-depth analysis conducted by the National Farmers Union in collaboration with the OBR and Treasury experts, 75% of the nation's working farms fall above the £1 million threshold and will be struck by the punitive changes. The changes are said to be caveated by different assumptions on rate relief.

There are misapplied exceptions. The first one is that the average family farm would not top the threshold of £3 million in value, which is just not the case. Great Ash farm in my constituency is a typical good-sized family farm consisting of 256 acres and is on the market for £3.5 million. In an inheritance tax valuation, the farm's livestock and machinery would be added to the value, bringing the total to around £3.68 million. Even when the acreage is not as large, the value of agricultural land alone often pushes farmers close to, if not over, the £3 million threshold and can certainly shatter the individual

threshold of £1 million. If we add to the value of the land the livestock, deadstock, properties, machinery and business, the owners of the farm are looking at a hefty valuation—not one that they can capitalise on to keep the farm, but one that will ensure they are caught in the claws of this onerous death duty.

The second misapplied exception is because farm ownership is not in all cases split equally between a husband and wife, and it does not always pass to a direct descendant. Existing capital gains tax rules have discouraged many older farmers from transferring their farms to their children owing to the potential tax burden, which means that ownership is staggered across many generations in some cases. Often, when there are not ownership models that meet the co-owning married couple status that the Chancellor uses for the modelling of those exceptions, it means that the various personal and dependent inheritance tax exemptions that go into the flawed Treasury equation on this policy cannot be used on many occasions.

The third misapplied exception, the residence nil rate band, is unlikely to be applicable. It is reduced by £1 for every £2 when the estate exceeds £2 million. Therefore, if a farm business exceeds £2.65 million, the residence nil rate tax band is no longer valid. That is yet another misapplied Treasury exemption, which will not have a realistic effect on family farms' ability to keep the taxman from taking everything they have. In conclusion, I will make no apology for standing up for my rural communities—

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. Your four minutes are up. I call Alistair Carmichael.

3.23 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I had put in to speak, but when I saw the attendance in the Chamber, I thought I would exercise a self-denying ordinance. That seems to have been counterproductive, so I will take a couple of minutes to drill down into some of the underlying assumptions in relation to this issue.

Let us bear in mind that there are three ways in which agricultural land can be passed on in succession. It can be relieved under agricultural property relief, under business property relief, or under a combination of the two. Hitherto, that has offered executry practitioners and others a range of different options. Frankly, as long as the land qualified as agricultural farming land, it did not really matter which route was taken.

In fact, any value was pretty academic because there was 100% relief in any event. I suspect that is why the HMRC guidance in relation to business property relief says that for a relief claimed under BPR, the book value, if I can use that shorthand, should be used. There is then no need to have the full market value. The letter that the Chancellor sent to the Treasury Committee on 15 November last year made no reference to those estates that passed on land under BPR only. To my mind, it is almost certainly the case that a large number of other farms will be caught by the measure that have not been included in Treasury calculations.

That view is reinforced today by the publication of the report by the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, which, as the hon. Member for Bridlington and The Wolds (Charlie Dewhurst) said, is a non-departmental

public body of DEFRA. The body is levy funded, but the press release says that it is not for it to say whether inheritance tax should be exigible in these circumstances—it just wishes to inform the debate with its analysis. Its analysis is that 42,204 farms out of 54,938 of 50 hectares or more will be affected.

That must surely give the Treasury some cause for concern, and a basis on which it could pause the change. We still have a long time to go; it will not be in the Finance Bill until October or November of this year. Where an element of doubt exists, it would surely be sensible for everyone concerned if the Treasury were to engage in a meaningful dialogue with the farming unions and others.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman is making an extremely fair assessment. Does he acknowledge that the Treasury is full of capable civil servants and Ministers who have a number of other options available to them? No doubt the argument will be that there is a black hole to fill, but even if one does accept that, there are still better options overall for the agricultural and rural communities that serve us across this country.

Mr Carmichael: There are other options. On another day, with more time available, we might be able to look at what the tax take will be for the changes. The Secretary of State, when he gave evidence to the Select Committee, said that they were not going to be a problem because most people will avoid them. In fact, there will be opportunities for that to be the case.

The underlying concern here, which the Minister has the opportunity to address, is whether the Government still adhere to the belief that there is a public policy interest in ensuring the transition of family farms down the generations. If that was the original basis on which the reliefs were introduced, and if it remains the policy objective to this day, the figures need to be looked at more carefully. The thresholds could be increased or there could be a 10-year clawback—whatever the solution may be; the industry is full of ideas. There are any number of people who will come forward with suggestions for the things that at least some people in Government say they sought to achieve by making the change.

If—the Prime Minister was not very clear about this; well, he was clear that he was not bothered—the object was to avoid the super-rich using land to shelter their wealth, there are better ways of doing that. The Minister will get full co-operation from the farming unions and communities, but in order to have that, there has to be a dialogue. At the moment we are getting nothing from the Treasury. If he takes no other message back to the Treasury today, he should take this: the Chancellor must meet the farming unions.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): We are back on schedule, so there are 10 minutes each for the Front-Bench spokespeople.

3.28 pm

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin (Ann Davies) for securing this important debate, and I applaud the cross-party work she is doing to ensure that Welsh farmers have a strong voice in this place. We also

heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour), who pointed out the holes in the proposed policy change. I welcome the contribution from my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), whose voice is so valued by the agricultural community across these isles. He pointed out that there is still time for the Government to engage properly with the sector, and that it is in the public interest to preserve these farms.

Last weekend, a group of farmers came to Llandrindod Wells to show me their accounts. What they wanted to show me was not how much they were making, but how little. Their figures were corroborated by statistics released this month by the Welsh Government, which show that farming incomes have fallen by a staggering 34% across Wales in the last year. The average income now sits at just £22,000, which is perhaps not surprising considering what farmers have had to cope with recently: rising energy costs, runaway fertiliser inflation, supermarkets forcing unfair prices on producers, the transition away from the EU customs union, disastrous Conservative trade deals with Australia and New Zealand, and extra regulations from the Welsh Government. Those are just a few of the issues they are coping with, and we can now add to that the rise in national insurance and the changes to APR and BPR announced in the autumn Budget. Family farms are on the brink.

The people working on our farms in Wales deserve a decent living. Farming is already a tough business, but those figures and challenges highlight how unsustainable the situation is for many families. The Government's proposed changes to agricultural property relief make things worse by forcing farmers either to sell parts of their land or to make repayments that will wipe out any annual profit. The Government are relying on outdated APR claim figures from 2021-22 and including non-commercial holdings in their calculations, which downplays the policy's impact. According to NFU Cymru, the number of farms in Wales that will be affected is closer to 75% than the 27% claimed by the Government. If the Government are so confident in their numbers, why will not they release a full impact assessment that includes national breakdowns for Wales and Scotland?

When speaking to people in the sector, it is clear that they know what the impact will be: a further contraction in the rural economy. More young people will be forced to leave farming, placing our food security at risk, driving up food prices and damaging the wider rural economy. The process of rural depopulation will continue, making it harder for local councils to provide services. In Wales, the policy could have a calamitous impact on the Welsh language.

Recently, I visited Llanelwedd primary school, and a nine-year-old pupil asked me about the rising cost of fertiliser. I asked him whether he was going to farm when he grew up, and he looked me in the eye and said, "I am a farmer already." Yet, under these new policies, this young man may inherit a smaller farm with little profit and fewer opportunities.

Farming is not a typical business, but it is an essential one. In Wales, we have already seen the decline of many industries as a result of political decisions, and I fear that the proposed changes to APR could have the same devastating effect on farming. Who will farm the Welsh countryside? Will it be Welsh farming families who have worked the land for generations, or will it be the super-rich?

[David Chadwick]

It is reported that the Government plan to soften the blow for non-doms, but they seem unwilling to listen to the farmers who are the backbone of our rural economy. Our farmers are patriots and servants of the land. Who will feed us when they are gone?

Surely, Ministers must now look again at this policy. It is not just Opposition parties and farming unions that are criticising it, but the Office for Budget Responsibility, supermarkets and even, as of this weekend, the Labour First Minister of Wales. Rural Labour MPs need to stand with them and to pressure the Government to reconsider, and I applaud the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden) for doing exactly that in this debate.

There are alternatives. Many in my constituency are already asking why Labour is targeting family farms, small businesses and charities for tax rises, while letting big banks, oil companies and tech giants off the hook. That is where the full troughs lie.

APR is not a loophole. As has been mentioned, it was purposefully introduced to protect family farms and safeguard our food security. If the Government want to stop tax evasion, they must work with the farming sector to find a solution that does not punish struggling farmers, because Welsh farmland belongs in Welsh farming hands.

3.34 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin (Ann Davies) for securing this incredibly important debate.

Here we are yet again, having summoned yet another Minister to the House. We have slowly worked our way through all the DEFRA Ministers, and now here we are with the Treasury. I welcome the new Treasury Minister to his place; he is replacing the Farming Minister, who seems to have disappeared from these debates. I hope the new Treasury Minister lasts longer in his post than the infamous “Ed Stone”, which he was so proud to have masterminded.

Let us remember why we are here. Last weekend, the NFU’s farming day of unity saw one of the biggest agricultural rallies, which took place in all parts of the United Kingdom, with people from all walks of life coming together to support our farmers. That followed protests outside supermarkets and Westminster, and at auction marts, but still the Government refuse to get behind our farming community and listen. Let them be under no illusion: the strength of feeling outside this place is rightly strong, and the issue will not go away.

When the Government announced this policy, I thought they were just being naive. Then I thought they were perhaps being arrogant. Now the only conclusion I can come to is that this is a vindictive policy aimed at our farming community. That is because the Government are still unwilling to listen to the concerns raised by Members and stakeholders, whether that be the NFU, the CLA or the Tenant Farmers Association. The Chancellor is yet to engage with any of them.

Although the Government will no doubt claim that only affect 27% of farms will be affected, research conducted by those industry experts concludes that at

least 75% of commercial family farms will be, because the £1 million threshold will impact the many. This disconnect stems from significant flaws in the Government’s methodology, which fails to account for the many market conditions and economic realities that our farming businesses face.

Given that the average size of a farm is about 200 acres, the average value of a farm holding will without doubt be well in excess of the £1 million threshold. When we take into account the value of the farmland; the farmhouse, and potentially a cottage or two; and any stocks, machinery or growing crops that may be in store, it will exceed the £1 million cap, therefore impacting the farming business. When we take into account the profit that a business may be making—or indeed struggling to make—on an average-sized farm of 200 acres, it is going to struggle to pay that bill.

What do farmers do? What are the options available to them? They can sell assets to pay the inheritance tax bill, or they can sell some of the livestock or some of the machinery, stocks or crops that may be in store, all impacting the productivity of that farming unit. Alternatively, they may want to take out a loan, which is an option suggested by the Government. I do not know whether the Treasury Minister has spoken to any banks, but I have, and none of them is saying that they will offer a loan to pay a tax bill. That is because the gearing of many of our family farming businesses is so highly strung that they could not pay any additional loan that may be granted to them, because the serviceability of that debt, which probably exists alongside the family farming business they already occupy, is so strongly geared.

That is before we take into account all the other budgetary consequences the Government have brought about: the increase in employer’s national insurance contributions, the increase in the minimum wage, the immediate effect of delinked payments, the removal of capital grants, the fertiliser tax that will no doubt be introduced and the double-cab pick-up tax. All impact the profitability and productivity of our many family farming businesses. This policy will also lead to a significant reduction in the land available to rent, given that around two thirds of working farms rent some or all of their land.

That is before we take into account the human cost. Farming can be a very lonely business, and I fear that the added weight of the changes to not only agricultural property relief but business property relief will be forcing some of the older generation, including those who are seriously ill at the moment, to make decisions right now. Indeed, I have spoken to a few. I spoke to one farmer just last week who is aged 78 and in ill health. If he passes away before April 2026, any death tax will be zero. If he passes away after April 2026, the death tax imposed on his family will be over £1 million. What decisions is that individual having to make right now? Those are the consequences of the decisions and choices this Government have made.

Will the Government have the moral courage to pause their actions and consult the industry experts I mentioned, as well as Opposition Members who continue to raise concerns on behalf of their constituents? As the shadow Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), has rightly asked every time she has been at the Dispatch Box, will the Government record farm suicides in the

next few months so that we can properly assess the human impact of the choices this Labour Government are making? What measures could be put in place to mitigate the impact of these changes on those who are already over retirement age or in serious ill health? They have held on to these assets for many years and many generations, and they simply want to be in a position to hand them down to the next generation.

I want to ask the Minister a few questions. Why on earth has an economic impact assessment been undertaken of the consequences of the changes to agricultural property relief, and of agricultural property relief dual-claimed with business property relief, but not solely of business property relief? Has any impact assessment been taken into account in the changes to inheritance tax, as well as the wider budgetary changes as a result of the measures I have already alluded to?

Why do the Government believe that it is unnecessary to take into account the size of a family farm when indicating the negative consequences that this proposal will have? If they implement a £1 million threshold, the size of a farm absolutely matters, because that takes into account not only the amount of land being farmed, but the existing productivity and the assets retained within that business. Why is the size of the farms not being taken into account?

If the Government are so determined to push ahead, can they tell us why on earth have they arrived at the £1 million threshold as the appropriate figure? How do they deal with the progressive disappearance of the residence nil rate band on estates valued at more than £2 million? How will they protect tenanted land on estates that will be valued at levels much higher than any threshold? What hope is there for the tenant farmer who is told that their landlord is now having to liquidate the capital value tied up in the land that they rent to satisfy the Government's potential tax liability? As a result, that tenant farmer will have no tenancy, because the tenancy will have to come to an end. For the tenant farmer, that will mean losing their home, their business and their livelihood. No amount of tax planning will help those tenant farmers to find a way forward.

In setting out the £1 million threshold, the Chancellor of the Exchequer claimed that she wanted to protect hard-working family farmers. I can tell the Minister that all family farmers are hard-working, so why on earth was the threshold set at that level? On behalf of the tenant farming sector, I can say that whatever level is set, it will do nothing to protect our tenant farmers. They will be impacted by the collateral damage caused by the decisions their landlord will have to make.

Just this week, the noble Lord Mackinlay of Richborough received an answer to a written parliamentary question in the other place that stated that agricultural property relief and business property relief on assets tied up in private pension funds will not receive any of the reliefs that Ministers are citing. As the Pensions Minister, can the Minister confirm that and explain why the Government have further excluded farms held under those types of ownership from this calculation? Given the Government's response in the other place, they will absolutely be impacted.

There is much more to do. As we have indicated, the Conservatives will reverse this disastrous family farm tax, which will impact hard-working family farms. The Opposition position is clear: this policy is bad for

farming businesses, bad for rural economic growth, bad for food prices and bad for food security. Farmers can see it, the NFU can see it, the CLA can see it, the Tenant Farmers Association can see it and the Central Association of Agricultural Valuers—of which I must declare I am a fellow, Mr Stringer—can see it. The supermarkets can see it, the Opposition can see it and the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden)—the one lonely Labour MP sitting on the Government Benches—can see it, so why on earth can the Government not see it?

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Minister, we have a generous amount of time left. Can you try to ensure that you leave at least two minutes for a winding-up speech?

3.45 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate with you in the Chair, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin (Ann Davies) on securing this debate and for engaging with many different pronunciations of the name of her constituency over the course of the last hour and a half. She rightly makes a powerful case for Welsh farming, which all of us in south Wales would like to reinforce.

We will not all agree on the policy under discussion today, but we all agree that topics such as this are important to many and should be properly discussed in this place—ideally at a lower temperature than in this room. I have listened closely to the contributions to the debate, and I thank all hon. Members for setting out their views and for speaking on behalf of not only their constituents, but their acquaintances, friends and family members. The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) made a clear case about the emotional, not just economic, importance of land to farmers and farming families. Most of us will have someone close to us who farms, but even those who do not will recognise the huge contribution that our farmers make to our food security, our economy and our rural communities. None of us takes those contributions for granted, and we have heard that today.

Before I turn to the specific points raised by hon. Members, I will briefly—I promise it will be brief—set out the context for the Budget decisions we are debating. This Government's inheritance matters, however much the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) declines to mention it. We had unsustainable public finances, equally unsustainable and struggling public services, councils going bust and prisons overflowing, so tough decisions were unavoidable in the Budget if we were to restore economic stability, fix the public finances and support public service. That is the backdrop to the decision to reform agricultural property relief.

That decision was not taken lightly, but it was a necessary decision, not least because rural communities lose out more than most when health, transport and council services across the UK do not live up to the standards that any of us expect. It was the right decision, because the Government will maintain significant levels of inheritance tax relief for agricultural property, far beyond what is available for most assets, because we recognise the role that those reliefs play in supporting farmers.

[Torsten Bell]

The debate is really about how we balance the objectives of protecting family farms with the public finances and public services. The status quo—the full, unlimited exemption introduced in 1992—has become unsustainable. The benefits have become far too heavily skewed towards the wealthiest estates. Some 40% of agricultural property relief benefits the top 7% of estates making claims. The top 2% claim 22% of the relief, which means 37 estates are claiming £119 million in a single—

John Glen: The Minister is a serious economist with a serious track record in analysing public finances. With all due respect, given the significant uncertainty and the fact that numerous organisations representing farming interests outside the party political debate have asked serious questions about the deliverability of the scheme and the amount of money that will be raised, surely he must accept that there is time for people such as he to work with officials to find better ways of finding the sums that he says he needs—I am not disputing that—to do the right thing by the farming communities of this country and not cause the unintended damage that will clearly take effect.

Torsten Bell: I thank the right hon. Member for his kind words, even though I cannot agree with everything that followed. I will come on to some of the points that he raised shortly. I think this will come up several times in the course of what remains of the debate, but we cannot use farm valuation data to make claims about inheritance tax claims. On the latter, we have the actual data for the claims made, which is what we rely on.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Torsten Bell: I will make some progress and then I will give way.

We see a similar picture for business property relief. It is in large part these reliefs that mean the largest estates pay materially lower rates of inheritance tax than more modest estates. That undermines faith in the fairness of our tax system more generally. Given the pressures we face, it cannot be right to leave this system unreformed, which is a point the hon. Member for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay) made well.

That is the context and the rationale for the changes to how we will target agricultural property relief and business property relief from April 2026. Contrary to the claims that these reliefs are being scrapped, which I am afraid to say were repeated by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) just now, we will continue to provide significant tax relief, including for small farms and businesses. Individuals will still benefit from 100% relief for the first £1 million of combined business and agricultural assets. Importantly, the relief sits on top of all the other spousal exemption and nil-rate bands. Depending on people's circumstances, up to £3 million can be passed on by a couple to their children or grandchildren free of inheritance tax.

Jim Shannon: I will try to be brief. On the rateable value, which the Minister mentioned earlier, my understanding after talking to the legal person of the Ulster Farmers' Union is that the rateable value is based on whether the farm was handed over in the 1970s, in the 1980s, in the 1990s or even in the 2000s, but the rateable value does

not show the real value of the land. Therefore, it is a flawed system. If it is a flawed system, the Minister needs to go back to the very beginning and look at it. I say that respectfully; I am not trying to catch anybody out. I am just saying that if something is not right, then get it right.

Torsten Bell: The point I was making was about the hon. Member's point that the relief had been scrapped; I was just making the point that the reliefs have certainly not been scrapped and that they remain very generous indeed.

Beyond the thresholds I mentioned, the 50% relief will continue and there will be a reduced marginal inheritance tax rate of 20%, rather than the standard 40%. Furthermore, in response to the points raised by several Members today about the cash-flow challenges that some farms face, particularly after bad years like last year, I will point out that heirs can spread the payments over 10 years interest-free, which is a benefit that is not seen anywhere else in the inheritance tax system.

Mr Carmichael: If people are looking at a £400,000 bill, which is what they would pay on a £3 million farm, and they earn £25,000 a year, they will still struggle to make that payment in 10 years; in fact, it would be downright impossible. That is how the land gets sold.

Torsten Bell: I will not comment on the individual example the right hon. Gentleman gave, but in general he is right to say that there can be large variations in the profits of farms between years and between farms. That is partly why the tax system already allows us—uniquely for farmers—to average profits over periods of time. Obviously, our advice to all farmers who think they will be affected by the change is that they should seek advice in turn.

I turn to the impact that these reforms will have, as that has been the central focus of most comments today.

Helen Morgan *rose*—

Torsten Bell: I will make some progress.

In 2026-27, up to 520 estates claiming agricultural property relief, including those that also claim business property relief, are expected to pay more as a result of this change. That means that around three quarters of estates claiming agricultural property relief will not pay any more than they do now.

The hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley and the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) asked questions about business property relief and specifically about claims that are not covered by agricultural property relief. Around three quarters of estates claiming business property relief alone—that is, the same proportion that have agricultural property relief, once we exclude those only holding alternative investment market or AIM shares, which are often held for the purpose of avoiding inheritance tax—will not pay any more inheritance tax in 2026-27. All estates making claims for these reliefs will continue to receive generous support, at a total cost of £1.1 billion to the Exchequer. The system will remain more generous than it was before 1992, when inheritance tax was applied at a maximum rate of 50%, including on the first £1 million that was passed on.

Several Members have implied that the change will end the passing-down of farms between generations. I gently point out in response that farmers, agricultural

landowners and small business owners did not receive 100% relief on inheritance tax for almost all of the 20th century, yet farms and businesses were very much passed down between generations. Indeed, the tax system will continue to support that process. As the Institute of Fiscal Studies has said, our reforms will:

“still leave...land much more lightly taxed than most other assets”.

These changes should also be seen in the wider context of support we are providing for farmers and rural communities. The hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) was wrong in his comments about the Office for Budget Responsibility, as the document produced this week provides no new information. However, he was right about the importance of food security, as was the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe). That is why the Budget committed £5 billion to farming over the next two years, including the biggest budget for sustainable food production in our history. It also committed £60 million to help farmers affected by the unprecedented wet weather last winter. The wider tax system will also continue to support farming—tenants as well as owners—including through exemptions from business rates, the use of rebated diesel and the ability, as I said, to average tax affairs over a number of years.

As we have heard today, the reforms to inheritance tax generate strong views. I understand that. I recognise that a small number of estates will have to pay more. I have not hidden from that today, nor in conversations—

Robbie Moore: Will the Minister confirm when he and the Government will start listening to the points being made by everybody outside this place—different stakeholders, banks, accountants—

Victoria Atkins: Supermarkets!

Robbie Moore: And supermarkets. The Minister and Government are, dare I say it, alone on this point.

Secondly, as he did not allow my intervention earlier, will the Minister confirm why the Government are not taking into account the value and the size of agricultural units when projecting the impact the changes will have on family farming businesses and farming businesses?

Torsten Bell: The hon. Gentleman raises the question of supermarkets. Supermarkets can talk but there is a lot they could do directly to support our farmers—

Robbie Moore: You are not listening to the question.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order.

Torsten Bell: I listened to the question and I will make more progress. I have not hidden from what I have heard from individuals across the country about this issue in recent months, including from talking to farmers in mid-Wales and East Anglia. Reform of the reliefs is necessary if we are serious about putting our public finances on a stable footing and repairing our broken public services, including the schools, hospitals and roads that communities across the UK—

Robbie Moore: Will the Minister give way?

Torsten Bell: No, I am going to finish. Communities across the UK, including in rural areas, rely on those things every single day. We have taken these decisions to make the system fairer and more sustainable and the decisions come alongside significant new investments in farming and support for small business.

Thank you, Mr Stringer, and all those who have spoken today, in particular the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin for securing the debate. I look forward to her concluding remarks.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): I call Ann Davies.

3.56 pm

Ann Davies: Diolch yn fawr, Mr Stringer. First, I want to thank all hon. Members for their contributions today. I appreciate their words, interventions and speeches. This is so important for food security but for us in Wales it is also, as has been mentioned, about the Welsh language and our culture. As I mentioned in my speech, there are alternatives that could bring further taxation into the Treasury and, more importantly, secure our food-producing farms for future generations. I have to be honest, I am really disappointed with the response we have had from the Government and the Treasury today. It is not what I was hoping to hear.

The issue affects my constituency of Caerfyrddin—I will say it again so Members can tune in to the pronunciation, although I thank everyone for trying—where 60% of residents live rurally. It affects all rural constituencies, of all political colours. We are here to represent our constituents and I ask kindly if we can do that with integrity, purpose and fairness. We need to have a Welsh impact assessment of the APR and BPR and I call again on the Government to do that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the impact of changes to Agricultural Property Relief.

A133-A120 Link Road

4 pm

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. I will call Sir Bernard Jenkin to move the motion and the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates. I have been informed that two hon. Members have been given permission by the mover and the Minister to speak in the debate.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government funding for the A133-A120 link road.

Thank you very much, Mr Stringer. There may even be a third intervention from a colleague, which I hope will be all right with you. I should have notified you in advance, for which I apologise. I thank the Minister for taking part in this debate regarding the further funding of the new A1331 link road.

The top line is that central Government must fund phase 2 of this road. The previous Government committed to do so, and provided 100% grant via a housing infrastructure fund grant of £99.9 million in 2020. Since then covid and inflation have struck, and the grant is now £50 million to £60 million short of what is needed to complete the road. That estimate is hearsay and not official, but it does not seem unreasonable.

Essex county council has started the construction of phase 1 but phase 2 is not funded. The Government's housing targets for Colchester and Tendring cannot be met without this vital new road. This development of 7,500 new homes is very substantial, but I support and understand the need for it. However, the development cannot be justified unless the road is completed in advance. Indeed, without completion of the road, the developers may well stop investing in the houses because the traffic will be intolerable and the new homes found to be unsaleable.

The proposed Tendring Colchester Borders garden community—or TCBGC—located between the A120 and the A133 north of the University of Essex, includes new primary and secondary schools, dedicated employment spaces, a nature reserve and a commitment to 30% affordable housing. The new homes will generate a huge increase in traffic. The new direct access to the A120 and the A133 is essential for the viability of the development. It will also significantly mitigate local adverse traffic impacts, both during the construction phase and as the new homes are occupied.

The whole project now hinges on phase 2, which will complete the link to the A120. Without phase 2 the A1331 will be a road to nowhere, and only add to traffic on already congested roads. There is no viable or agreed funding for phase 2. I hope I do not have to disabuse the Government of that fact. Many councillors and local people fear that phase 2 will never be completed. So far, the Government have told the county council, "There is no budget" for any additional funding.

My first question is this: will the Government please now consider making up the shortfall? I wrote to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government on 11 November and received a reply just last night. These debates have a purpose: they provoke a response. I am grateful for the Minister's letter, in this case from Baroness Taylor, in which she states:

"Essex county council and Latimer (the housing developer) have committed to use reasonable endeavours to procure delivery of phase 2...And in order to safeguard its delivery, there is a planning policy requirement for the developer to demonstrate funding is in place for the full link road."

I put it to the Minister that this really is wishful thinking. Think about it: 7,500 homes and a £60 million contribution to finish phase 2—that is £8,000 per home, and that is just for the road. Where is all the other section 106 funding required for this development going to come from?

Pam Cox (Colchester) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) for securing the debate.

In November 2024 I had the pleasure of joining partners from Essex county council, Colchester city council, Latimer, Clarion Housing and Homes England, as well as contractors, to see the start of phase 1 of the link road. As the hon. Member rightly said, it is just phase 1, and we need phase 2 to be completed. Speeding up phase 2 by creating a deal with those partners, including the Government, will be a vital part of that. I hope he will support initiatives around that, as we have already been having those kinds of discussions. I also invite the Minister to visit the project to see just how short a link road will be required to complete what will be an outstanding development that straddles both our constituencies.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: The hon. Lady is clearly keener on the development than I am, but if the Government come up with some money to make this whole development viable again, I will of course resume my support for it. I would also very much welcome a visit from the Minister, but it remains to be seen whether we will get one. I am afraid that I refused to attend that event in November because I thought it was irresponsible to start a road if nobody knew how it would be funded or when it would be completed. The Minister may, in her response today, refer to a December memorandum of understanding on this matter between Essex county council, the Colchester and Tendring councils and Latimer, but I have to point out to her and to the Department that this is not a binding agreement. Paragraph 1.6 states that the funding of infrastructure, including the A1331 link road, is contingent, and that it

"will only be possible if the overall delivery of TCBGC is financially viable."

Remember that it is £8,000 per home just for the road. TCBGC will no longer be financially viable. Financial contributions through section 106 will not be enough to cover the cost of phase 2 of the road along with all the other essential infrastructure plans for this development.

What has got to give? Will we finish up with more GP practices closing their lists and not accepting more patients, or more schools without places for local kids? Section 106 funding should be for local infrastructure, not for national infrastructure such as this proposed new A road. The clue is in the term "A road"—it is part of the trunk road network. What is the benefit-cost ratio for this new road? The original funding application said 7:1. A 7:1 benefit-cost ratio is well above the threshold of "very high", which is only 4:1, so this public investment will give very big payback for the local economy, jobs and tax revenues.

Can the Minister provide us with a benefit-cost ration for just phase 1, which the Government have now retrospectively agreed to fund on its own? This was approved via a material amendment to the grant determination agreement that the Government have signed, allowing the county council to build just phase 1 with the grant money so far allocated. The Government agreement makes them complicit in the wishful thinking that this development will be viable. My guess is that the benefit-cost ratio for just phase 1 will be at rock bottom. It will have very little economic benefit at all, and would never have passed muster if it had been proposed as part of the funding arrangements at the outset.

Without knowing what the phase 1 benefit-cost ratio is, how could the Government possibly justify turning down the request for funding to complete the A1331 link road? I speculate that the benefit-cost ratio of finishing the road is off the scale because of the sunk costs already committed. Labour has promised growth and new homes to voters, but with infrastructure first—

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I would have preferred earlier notice of the intervention, but I will of course give way to the hon. Lady.

Marie Goldman: I apologise to the hon. Gentleman and thank him for giving way. His point is about the importance of infrastructure coming first. Just down the road from the proposed A1331 is the A12 widening scheme, which affects my constituency of Chelmsford, which will potentially affect the delivery of 55,000 new homes, and for which we are waiting for confirmation of funding. Those homes would, of course, go a long way towards meeting the Government's 1.5 million target. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the "infrastructure first" principle is crucial, and that the Government must not overlook it when they are considering funding?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: If the Government want to achieve anything like their 1.5 million target, they will have to put the money up front for the infrastructure. Here is a shovel-ready deal for the Government to show their commitment to achieve their target of 1.5 million new homes in this Parliament. If the promised 7,500 new homes are not built because phase 2 of the A1331 is not completed, then Colchester city council and Tendring district council do not have a chance of achieving the Government's ambition. Without phase 2 of the road being completed ahead of the new homes—which was the original intention—the most likely outcome is that the new garden community will be started and then stalled. There is already standstill traffic every day on the A133 where the southern end of the A1331 is intended to relieve traffic congestion. A few hundred new homes will just add to that gridlock.

In November, in my letter to the Secretary of State, I made it clear that I have not, until now, felt the need to object to this massive housing development in my constituency. I recognise the need for new housing, but my support is contingent on the principle of "infrastructure first". If there is no new money from the Government and nobody can say when the road will be completed, I will object, and so will the vast majority of the people of Colchester and Tendring. The Government are shifting responsibility on to the developer and local authorities

for the road on which the viability of the whole scheme depends. I therefore ask the Minister—although somehow I do not expect a conclusive answer today—to top up the housing infrastructure fund grant so that it covers 100% of the cost, as originally intended, and to publish the benefit-cost ratio of just funding phase 1, so that we can see what poor value limited HIF funding now represents. I also ask the Government to affirm the principle of "infrastructure first"—I hope the Minister can do so—and ask for their acknowledgment that the section 106 money is not appropriate for funding a major piece of national infrastructure. An A road is being proposed here, not a local road, which is why central Government should fund it.

I notified you, very late, Mr Stringer, that the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) might want to add a few words.

4.13 pm

Nigel Farage (Clacton) (Reform): I am here to support my geographical neighbour, the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin). He is absolutely right: it would be wholly irresponsible to commence the building of thousands of houses without knowing that a road will be completed. So I completely support what he says, and I am sure that constituents in all neighbouring constituencies overwhelmingly agree.

I just wonder whether, when these things are debated, be it here or in the main Chamber, we ever pause for a moment to understand what we have done—what both Conservative and Labour Governments have done—a 10 million increase in the population in the last 20 years; the Office for National Statistics this morning suggesting that another 3 million to 4 million will be added in the next few years. These are all problems of uncontrolled mass migration and the population explosion. I wonder whether many Members level with their constituents about the causal factors here.

4.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) for securing this important debate and for highlighting his concerns about this project, and I thank other hon. Members for their interventions. As someone who spent many years securing debates of this form to raise important issues affecting my constituency, I know how much these debates matter to constituency MPs.

The Government recognise that there are significant benefits to high-quality, large-scale developments that deliver much-needed housing. I am grateful that the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex acknowledges the importance of housing in communities such as his and those up and down the country. We recognise that the right infrastructure must be put in place first, including the right transport infrastructure. Without that, facilities and transport become overstretched. One of the consequences is congestion and delays for existing residents and commercial traffic.

The housing infrastructure fund was established in 2017, primarily to provide up-front infrastructure funding to support the delivery of large-scale strategic housing developments. The £4.2 billion fund will unlock 260,000 homes, 30,000 of which have already been started,

[*Rushanara Ali*]

with a further 73,000 completions expected during this Parliament. That will make a significant contribution to the Government's target of 1.5 million homes, which is a major commitment of this Government—previous Governments also had commitments around house building, recognising the need for housing in our country.

The hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex spoke about the Tendring Colchester Borders garden community project in his constituency. That project is expected to initially unlock 5,000 homes at the garden community, and that figure will increase over time to a total of 7,500. The hon. Member highlighted a number of points, and I will restate some of them. This Government are providing £99.9 million from the housing infrastructure fund for Essex county council to build a rapid transit system high-speed bus route. That will run from the north to the south of Colchester, connecting to the new community. I am pleased to note that that is under construction.

I appreciate the concerns that the hon. Member shared about the second item of infrastructure being funded: the A1331 link road, which will connect the A133 and A120. Over the past few years, infrastructure projects across the country have been affected by a number of unexpected factors, such as the pandemic, rising inflation, the shortage of skilled labour and other external events, and in a constrained fiscal environment the Government have had to make tough decisions.

Due to the escalation of the costs with the Tendring project, it is no longer possible to construct the entire link road with the funding available. Additionally, there continue to be delivery challenges with sections of the road, particularly in relation to land acquisition. In response to the request from Essex county council in 2023, the previous Government made the decision to use the available grant to only fund phase 1 of the link road. I appreciate the hon. Member's concerns about that descope of the project. I assure him that, together with the first phase of the link road, the existing local road network is sufficient to support 5,000 homes in the garden community. Moreover, I assure him that the intention to deliver the full link remains.

To that end, there is ongoing engagement between Homes England and local partners on the support that will enable the full link road to be delivered as soon as possible. That includes capacity funding to support planning, facilitation of joint working between public and private sector partners, and cross-Government brokerage support, which I hope addresses some of the points the hon. Member raised.

Both Essex county council and the housing developer, Latimer, have committed to use reasonable endeavours to procure delivery of phase 2. Additionally, to safeguard its delivery, there is a planning policy requirement for the developer to demonstrate that funding is in place for the full link road. My Department is also providing support through our new homes accelerator programme, which will help with the pre-planning process for the garden community.

Tendring Colchester Borders garden community is an important project in an area of high demand. The housing infrastructure fund grant is a catalyst for a wider £250 million private sector investment into

infrastructure. The new community will include a new country park and significant green and blue infrastructure, promoting sustainable and active travel, a new 25-hectare sports and leisure park to be used in conjunction with the University of Essex, and a new 17-hectare business park for general employment, business and industrial purposes. The Government are committed to the full delivery of the infrastructure originally planned under the housing and infrastructure fund grant.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: The Minister is saying one or two interesting things. First, I have never heard anybody say—I wrote down what she said—that the “local road network is sufficient to support 5,000 homes”. I do not know who has told her that, but I promise her that she has been misinformed. On the point she just made about all the other desirable infrastructure for the development, that has to come out of the section 106 money, which will now, according to the MOU, be diverted to the road. Section 106 money is not unlimited. The possible £60 million for the development—to fund that road—is a very large sum. It is £8,000 per household. Why is she convinced that this is still a viable development?

Rushanara Ali: The hon. Member has set out his critique. What is important is that we get it right, and that requires close working, with him and other hon. Members, and my Department, and that is why the brokerage element of what we do is really important. He makes very important points; we can continue the conversation beyond this debate, as I appreciate that there are a number of complex issues that need to be worked through. However, we are determined to support the development and ensure that it is a success.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I have little doubt that the delegated authority of the three combined authorities will be minded to give planning permission come what may. However, I reckon that the decision would be subject to judicial review if the road is not guaranteed at the time of planning permission being granted. It is a policy decision to ensure that the road is guaranteed, but what else is then taken away? That itself will be challengeable under judicial review, given that it will be so far from the original plan. I am grateful to hear from the Minister that she wants the conversation to continue. Long may it continue, and I hope that we can reach a satisfactory solution.

Rushanara Ali: I am grateful to the hon. Member, who is an extremely diligent Member of this House, with many years of experience, and a great campaigner. He makes important points about planning matters, which obviously I cannot go into, but I look forward to working with him.

I thank the hon. Member for securing this debate. This Government are committed to making sure we deliver on housing, but it is of course extremely important that we continue to work closely with hon. Members to make sure we address the issues that come up. I very much look forward to continuing the discussion with the hon. Member and to ensuring that my Department can do what it can to support a successful way through on this project.

Question put and agreed to.

4.24 pm

Sitting suspended.

Defence Procurement: Small and Medium-sized Enterprises

4.40 pm

Alan Strickland (Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered SME participation in defence procurement.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I recognise that procurement is not usually a topic that gets pulses racing, but the threats posed to the UK and our allies certainly should. Central to our ability to rise to these challenges is using the defence industrial strategy to unleash the inventiveness, ingenuity and creativity of British industry.

I will cover three things: our need to respond to the changing face of warfare; adopting a proactive entrepreneurial approach to acquiring the defence supplies we need; and the practical steps we can take to place small and medium-sized enterprises innovation in the service of our national defence.

I turn first to our need to respond to the changing face of warfare. Technology has been rapidly altering the nature of warfare at a pace rarely witnessed before. We see this most clearly in Ukraine, where drone technology has rewritten the rules of modern conflict. Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine and the resulting war have shown us the incredible speed at which military technology is advancing. Reconnaissance drones paint detailed maps of occupied territory, helping to guide unmanned attack drones in strikes on Russian vehicles and equipment. The role of this technology is now so important that a dedicated branch of the Ukrainian military has been established to deploy it. Here at home, I have seen first hand the RAF's latest unmanned air systems as part of an armed forces parliamentary scheme visit.

Drones, artificial intelligence and rapidly evolving satellite technology are being used to redefine all aspects of conflict, from the battlefield to the information war, to who controls space. Amid those significant and growing global threats, it is vital that Britain is at the forefront of developments to ensure that we can defend not only ourselves, but our allies and interests across the globe.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing today's debate on SME participation in defence procurement. Having run my own start-up construction business in Bonnie Scotland many years ago, I can appreciate full well that small and medium-sized enterprises are not given their due and rightful importance by Government structures, and more generally. The Government's own Green Paper notes there is a need

"to address issues that inhibit or prevent growth in the defence sector".

Does my hon. Friend agree that defence contract opportunities must be made more accessible to SMEs in order for us to support their growth and continue innovation?

Alan Strickland: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He is absolutely right: across the economy with the Government's growth mission, defence must be a crucial sector, but as he has said, too often SMEs are shut out by bureaucratic processes, which I will be keen to talk more about.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this topic forward. He is absolutely right to recognise the importance of SMEs and what they can do. In Northern Ireland, Thales invented and produced the NLAW—the next-generation light anti-tank weapon—which slowed down the Russian advance; Thales is also at the forefront of cybersecurity, and all those things are very important. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, when it comes to supporting all SMEs across the United Kingdom—those 434,000 jobs—Northern Ireland must be an integral part of that? I know that is what the hon. Gentleman and the Minister think, and it really is the way forward.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. This debate is for an hour and is well-subscribed, so I ask hon. Members to be brief in their interventions.

Alan Strickland: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. He is absolutely right that the commitment of Ministers and the defence industrial strategy to sovereign supply must include all parts of our United Kingdom, including the excellent capabilities in Northern Ireland.

Being war-ready for conflicts we cannot predict that will use technology that has not yet been invented, means giving our military the agility and capability to adapt to this changing landscape. Changing the way in which we think about defence procurement is central to this. My second point is around adopting a proactive, entrepreneurial approach to acquiring the defence supplies we need.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way and for securing this important debate.

Universal Quantum is an SME based in Haywards Heath, in my constituency, which builds utility scale quantum computers. It already works in partnership with leading organisations and investors in the field. Does the hon. Gentleman agree the Ministry of Defence should ensure emerging technologies, such as quantum computing, that are being spearheaded by SMEs like Universal Quantum are part of its procurement strategy?

Alan Strickland: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention. I agree. As she rightly says, warfare is developing very quickly and high-tech solutions, of the excellent type she described in her constituency, must absolutely be part of that.

When I talk to innovative SMEs at the Durham University spinout science park in my constituency, it is clear we need to think differently about defence procurement. NETPark in Sedgefield is home to more than 40 cutting-edge firms, many of which supply major defence companies and our allies across the globe. They include Kromek, which invented new ways of detecting radiation and biological weaponry; Filtronic, which manufactures satellite components; and Graphene Composites, which produces ultra-light ballistic shields. Their experiences suggest that we need to do more to remain globally competitive. As other hon. Members have rightly said, too often small businesses can feel that UK defence procurement focuses on process at the expense of outcomes and can stifle bottom-up inventiveness with top-down bureaucracy.

[Alan Strickland]

Our allies show us how we might do this differently. The United States Defence Department takes a broader approach to encouraging and funding military innovation. SMEs are encouraged to approach the Government directly with ideas for new products or with potential technologies they are developing and to showcase tech solutions to problems that may not have even been considered yet by officials. In turn the US Defence Department and its research agency, the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency, proactively seek out innovative small companies that offer new ideas and technologies that contribute to tackling future military challenges.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing today's debate. Is he suggesting that the Ministry of Defence needs to completely change its culture and processes in the way it liaises with these important and innovative companies? Certainly that appears to be the issue in my constituency, where there are many very innovative SMEs.

Alan Strickland: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I absolutely agree. In my previous life in the housing and the charity sector, I have interacted with Government procurement across Departments. There is a challenge with culture across Whitehall, as my hon. Friend says, of often struggling to deal with the realities of innovative and agile small firms.

The approach I described means the US spends around a quarter of its entire military budget directly with SMEs, much higher than the comparable figure for the UK. The UK Defence and Security Accelerator does good work in directly using SMEs to fill technology gaps. However Northern Defence Industries, representing more than 300 companies, has called on the MOD to do more to facilitate open call competition. That would allow SMEs to showcase their defence products directly to Government, without having to wait for specific procurement projects and tenders to be opened.

I strongly welcome the intention of Defence Ministers to use the defence industrial strategy to drive engagement with non-traditional contractors, including SMEs. We have a real opportunity to change the way Government think about procurement and a real chance to grow the culture, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Reading Central (Matt Rodda) referred, that gives us the wartime pace of innovation that we need. Just as Churchill's groundbreaking military technology labs did during the second world war, let us use the resources of the British state to harness the inventiveness and ingenuity offered by our world-leading science and tech companies.

Turning finally to the practical steps we can take to place SME innovation in the service of our national defence, one of the key things we could look at is the reliance across Government on the prime contractor model. In practice this means that the Ministry of Defence often uses large contractors to work with SMEs further down the supply chain rather than engaging with them directly. For some years it has been common across Government, under all parties, to shift to working with smaller pools of larger suppliers. That has some obvious benefits, such as reducing the number of contracts that officials need to manage, transferring financial risk and outsourcing

much day-to-day contract management, but there is also evidence that the approach can have its downsides, particularly in squeezing out smaller, innovative suppliers. When I worked in the charity sector, strengthening the prime contractor approach in delivering the Work programme led to a number of innovative charities with a real track record of getting people into jobs being unable to work with Government in the future.

So what can be done? Where possible, let us try to reserve complex framework contracts for large projects that genuinely need them, reducing the proportion of tenders available only to prime contractors. Where large contracts are required, can we look at these to see whether we can break them down into smaller components that are more accessible to SMEs? Secondly, where working through a prime contractor is the right answer, could we strengthen the requirements for them to engage with SMEs proactively and simplify contract arrangements? Thirdly, could we open up opportunities for the Ministry of Defence to contract directly with SMEs by removing red tape and doing so with an agile and entrepreneurial mindset? If businesses at NETpark can be direct suppliers to DARPA, the US Defence Department, NASA and other allied Governments, I am confident that, through the defence industrial strategy, we too can open up more opportunities for SMEs.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. To simplify the point he is making, we should all remember that from small acorns great oaks grow, and even big companies in my constituency such as Rolls-Royce and BAE Systems will have started at some point as an SME. What he is suggesting today would help those SMEs that we all have in our constituencies maybe one day to grow into those grand great oaks.

Alan Strickland: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. Considering that we have shop-bought drones making such a difference in Ukraine and that technology is being used in all sorts of ways, my hon. Friend is absolutely right that we need to hunt out and support the small, innovative businesses doing very different and distinctive work in constituencies around the country.

It has been a privilege to set out some of the challenges faced by our innovative SMEs and how the defence industrial strategy can address them. I look forward to welcoming the Minister to my constituency soon for a business roundtable to discuss these issues in more detail. I strongly welcome the Government's putting growth at the heart of the new defence industrial strategy. The defence sector supports one in 60 jobs in the UK, the majority of which are outside London, so this is a real and tangible way of spreading growth, skills and opportunity to all corners of our country. More than that, if we can improve the way we work with SMEs, it will allow us to build an ironclad, sovereign supply of vital defence equipment. Not only will that provide jobs and drive growth but it will protect us from global shocks in the supply chain.

Warfare is changing, and we must change with it. Global production is threatened, so we must ensure sovereign supply. As the threat grows, so must our defence manufacturing base. I look forward to working with Defence Ministers on this important strategy and to further contributions from hon. Members of all parties in this debate.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to speak in the debate. We will start with a three-minute time limit on speeches.

4.53 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer, and I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland), who has done us all a great service in securing this debate. I want to use my limited time to draw attention to some fantastic SMEs, including one in particular that is based near Honiton in the south-west.

The south-west has an absolutely fantastic defence industry, which is powering up the region and making for some fantastic industrial developments. The Ministry of Defence employs about 33,000 people directly in the south-west, but of course there is also a huge, integrated supply chain that supports many more jobs besides. It is surely the aim of the new Government to have a more innovative and resilient supply chain.

Supacat has been producing vehicles in Dunkeswell in Devon for more than 40 years and is at the forefront of designing and supplying cutting-edge tactical military vehicles. Its high-mobility transporter vehicles have been used by British forces in Afghanistan and on UN deployments in Mali. More than 95% of its supply chain comes from UK-based SMEs, 85% of which are in the south-west. It currently has a contract with Defence Equipment and Support; the Ministry of Defence is buying 70 Jackals and 53 Coyotes, as the Minister will know.

In the past, there has sometimes been an instinct to buy off the shelf and from overseas, which would be a huge mistake in relation to the procurement of vehicles for the impending short-range air defence—SHORAD—programme. That instinct to look overseas in the first instance weakens investment, reduces long-term job security and, ultimately, puts future domestic procurement at risk. Supacat has more than 150 skilled workers in Devon, but its future depends on orders that will be delivered beyond November 2025.

The Defence Secretary intends the new defence industrial strategy to boost world-class production and manufacturing, and I understand that supporting UK exports will be key to that. It is incumbent on us to buy from fantastic companies such as Supacat, if we then look to countries such as Saudi Arabia, Czechia and Ireland to buy the Jackal, as they have done. To conclude, there are some fantastic SMEs, including Supacat at Dunkeswell, and I commend to that company the House.

4.57 pm

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland) on bringing this debate to the House. I wholeheartedly agree that the Government need to work in close partnership with businesses of all sizes, and the Government have made it clear to me that they recognise the importance of small and medium-sized enterprises entering the defence procurement programme. I commend the Government's engagement with the sector and I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for agreeing to visit Stockton North to meet local businesses in a region steeped in industrial heritage, resilience and innovation.

Through the money spent on defence, the Government can satisfy their mission of building more in Britain and increasing skilled jobs in all corners of the country. Teesside and Stockton North are places that not only built the bridges and structures of the past, but are ready to lead the future of our nation's defence capabilities. Teesside industries have long been the backbone of British manufacturing, and today the Teesside defence and innovation cluster stands poised to drive next-generation defence matériel. I will give the Minister a taster of some of the businesses that she will see on her visit to Stockton North.

Tracerco is a business based in Billingham in my constituency. Its cutting-edge detection equipment, already being deployed in Ukraine, is saving lives and ensuring the safety of soldiers in some of the most dangerous environments on Earth. Wilton, situated on the banks of the Tees, has a proud history of precision engineering and fabrication. It is expanding its work in the defence sector, demonstrating how Teesside's industrial expertise can be the cornerstone for delivering the complex infrastructure projects that our armed forces need.

Of course, RelyOn Nutec is a facility with a name that is synonymous with world-class training. Generations of offshore workers have passed through its doors, and it is now preparing the workforce for the next wave of defence projects, ensuring that we have the skills that we need for the challenges ahead. Teesside is a region with a proud history, but more than that, a bold future, and is prepared to bolster the nation's resilience in an era of increasing global volatility. From the steel forged in Redcar to the innovation being crafted today, we have always been a place of strength and ingenuity.

4.59 pm

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, and I commend the hon. Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland) for bringing this matter to the House.

As has already been referred to, Northern Ireland has a rich history in defence and in the production necessary to maintain defence. That is true in the large business sector where, for example, we have Thales, which of course has led the way in next-generation defence equipment. The primary thing I will say to the Minister today, however, is that we also have a great layer of SMEs under that in Northern Ireland that are not getting a fair crack of the whip when it comes to MOD procurement.

I say that on the strength of evidence given to a parliamentary inquiry by ADS Group—the trade association. It set out some very stark figures for 2022-23, the most recent year for which we have relevant data, that said that all the Government contracts to Northern Ireland SMEs in that year amounted to a paltry £2 million. For Scotland, the figure was £29 million and for the much-favoured south-west of England, the figure was £408 million. Even though 95% of ADS Group members are SMEs, Northern Ireland SMEs got only 0.15% of MOD expenditure in 2022-23. How can that be fair? My basic appeal to the Department and to the Minister is for fairness, a level playing field and equity in the distribution of contracts.

We have remarkable skills in many of our SMEs and we have many leaders in the digital and technology sector. Some of them subcontract to Thales, but all those firms

[Jim Allister]

have much to contribute in their own right. I say to the Minister that we must bring some equity to the situation. It can never be fair that in 2022-23, the MOD's per capita spend on all contracts was £100 in Northern Ireland, £380 in Scotland and England, and £250 in Wales. Let us have some levelling up.

5.2 pm

Chris Evans (Caerphilly) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland) on securing this timely debate.

I also welcome—quite belatedly—the Minister to her place. She has an extremely tough job, as was underlined by Sir Jeremy Quin, the former right hon. Member for Horsham, who had her role in the last Conservative Administration, when he said:

“Defence procurement is never easy—it is a tough thing to get right—and I have not yet found a state anywhere on earth that can really deliver to the kind of standards that I am sure the hon. Gentleman would wish to see.”—[*Official Report*, 18 July 2022; Vol. 684, c. 718.]

That is further underlined by the latest figures from the MOD about Government projects, which were set out in the portfolio in March 2024. That document said that 88 projects are on red, 18 are on amber and only one is on green. Behind those figures is a supply chain that will also be affected. Many firms in that supply chain will be small and medium-sized businesses that do not have large bid-writing or tendering teams. Under the Procurement Act 2023, if all goes according to plan, SMEs will spend less time bidding for contracts that they do not win and many of the tick-box exercises will be reserved for the company that is offered the work.

During my time in opposition, I was often told that the MOD has a tendency to change its mind at short notice. The best example of this, which I am sure the Minister has sleepless nights about, is the Ajax programme; it wasted £5.5 billion, including in my former constituency.

It is important to strike the right balance between removing unnecessary red tape and ensuring that contractors can prove that they are up to the job. When I was in opposition, the most important thing that I learned when speaking to SMEs was about late payments. In all the time that I shadowed the role of the Minister for Defence Procurement, I got angry only once, when a prime contractor stood in front of me and said, “Now we’ve finally been paid by the MOD, we can pay the supply chain”—18 months later.

The businesses involved in the supply chain are not large—very often, they consist of just five or six people being innovative—yet they lose out because prime contractors put the needs of other people above their needs. Of course, there will always be examples of good practice, but one major defence contractor operating here in the UK was, at the last count, taking an average of 101 days to pay its supply chain. Would any of us accept a three or four-month wait to get paid?

In 2020, multiple major defence firms were suspended from the prompt payment code for consistently failing to pay their suppliers on time. SMEs across all sectors spend a total of 50 million hours a year chasing payments.

If the Government mean what they say about promoting productivity and growth in defence SMEs, addressing late payment must surely be a priority going forward.

Voluntary codes are all very well, but they are just that—voluntary. If we are serious about this issue, we must enshrine redress in legislation. It is unacceptable to pay our SMEs—the lifeblood of our economy—late, and there should be penalties for that. Late payments create cash-flow problems, which in turn affect SMEs’ access to finance. That cannot go on.

5.5 pm

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland) on securing this important debate. He spoke about the importance of defence procurement for our region in particular, and our potential for strengthening our national economy and national security.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Chris McDonald) says, for decades, Teesside has helped to build and power our economy, and the steel forged in our furnaces became the bones of bridges, railways, and skyscrapers around the world. We once built the world, and today we stand ready to defend it. In addition to the examples that we have heard of Teesside innovators working at the cutting edge, I will give an example from my constituency—that of Tees Components.

Tees Components provides the precision machining required to service the state-of-the-art equipment that our Navy relies on, such as the bow thrusters used on Astute-class submarines. Such manufacturers play an integral role in developing local skills through high-level skills training and apprenticeships, and in delivering good-quality jobs in an area that really needs them, but where talent and tenacity are never in short supply. Too often, however, such companies—with world-leading innovation and a proven track record—are left to struggle for a seat at the table. It is clear to me, and to other Members, that there is much more to do to open up procurement for SMEs.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor on the need to improve engagement with SMEs. The Federation of Small Businesses has long called for a centrally managed body to oversee MOD contracts; I wonder whether the new strategic leadership of the national armaments director, as promised by the Government, can help to disaggregate some of those contracts and deliver the changes that are required.

Currently, only 4% of direct MOD expenditure goes to SMEs, and indirect involvement in the supply chain often proves unsustainable. Although large multinationals typically receive payments within five days, SMEs often face late payments, as we have heard. One solution could be specifically earmarking a portion of the prime contractor bid funding to support SME participation. That could include measures to mitigate financial risk, such as up-front payments.

I believe that the new Labour Government understand the challenges that we face. We have already heard some of the measures being taken to reform defence procurement and make it work for Britain. I am proud that the Government have identified defence as a growth-driving

sector in our industrial strategy and I welcome the work under way in the SDR and in the defence industrial strategy to ensure that British business is prioritised in procurement.

This debate is about ensuring that we invest in defence, but it is also about ensuring that we invest in our communities—our workers, engineers and innovators who want a chance to contribute to Britain's success. It is about remembering that national security does not begin and end on the battlefield, but in the workshops and design labs of Skelton or Sedgfield.

5.8 pm

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): I thank you, Mr Stringer, for the opportunity to serve under your chairmanship and my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland) for tabling this important debate. The UK defence sector is recognised as a global leader: Government defence spending supports more than 400,000 jobs across the UK, and many jobs in my constituency. I therefore welcomed the Defence Secretary's announcement of plans to develop a new defence industrial strategy with the aim of producing a better—more integrated, more innovative and more resilient—defence sector in the UK. I therefore want to make the point loud and clear to the Minister that, in my constituency of Mansfield, we are well prepared to support the Government in that mission, and indeed are already doing so.

I draw particular attention to a local business, Glenair, which I will visit next month. It employs about 1,000 people in my constituency and works to supply products that are critical to our defence, including military aerospace, nuclear and military land systems. Glenair is driving those innovations; in fact, it is on the cutting edge of innovation. I am pleased that the Government want to do all they can to support this industry, and therefore companies such as Glenair, here in the UK. Glenair is a fantastic example of an employer that is investing in its workforce. This year, it took on almost 60 apprentices across a wide range of disciplines, not just in engineering. It established those apprenticeships well before the apprenticeship levy was introduced, because it recognises how important well-supported, well-trained and highly skilled workers are to its business. This is also why it is crucial for us as a Government to invest in further and higher education.

Let me summarise my main points: first, we already have some fantastic innovative businesses here in the UK; secondly, investing in education and looking at how we can be more innovative will make a significant difference to delivering on our objectives; and, thirdly, in Mansfield we are unashamedly ready to support the Government in doing so. During the election campaign last summer, I promised to deliver on local missions for the people of Mansfield. One of them was to do everything in my power to help provide a stable and growing economy with good-quality jobs for everyone. With that in mind, I invite the Minister to visit Mansfield so that she can see for herself the fantastic opportunities that are available. Let us work together so that we can play our part in delivering that objective.

5.11 pm

Fred Thomas (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Aycliffe

and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland) for securing this important debate. He is a huge champion for SMEs in his constituency and for national security in general.

I will begin by pointing out that defence primes are not evil. They do not set out to harm British national security. They do amazing things, and some of the things we are proudest of in Britain—sovereign capabilities—are delivered by those primes. It is no surprise that a huge proportion of defence spending goes to them, because some of the capabilities that they deliver—things that give us our unique edge in the world—are the most expensive things on the British balance sheet.

Primes do not have to be negative in the context of SMEs either, because they can offer SMEs something that we all know is missing: the ability to communicate with the Government. By joining with primes, SMEs are sometimes able to advertise their ability to the Government in a way that they would not be able to otherwise.

Richard Foord: To reinforce the hon. Member's point, the way that Supacat has teamed up with Babcock in Plymouth in recent years to scale up its skilled workforce by 60% is an example of what he is describing.

Fred Thomas: The hon. Member is absolutely correct. It is not quite in my constituency—it is in the neighbouring constituency, Plymouth Sutton and Devonport—but I agree.

In terms of SMEs, primes can also offer a service to the Government and the Ministry of Defence. If we had a massive change in system, which would be extremely hard to execute, and the MOD was suddenly able to procure directly from SMEs across the country, we would have an enormous challenge of integrating the different capabilities into a usable platform. Half of the things would not be able to talk to each other; they would be made to do their one task and we would then try to put on top of them a second radar system or some piece of satellite that could speak down to whatever comms link we were using. That is enormously expensive. However, primes can do that integration. They can go to the Government and say, "You have a demand signal to do something," rather than to have a particular capability—to monitor the North sea, for example—and then go out to the SMEs in different constituencies that hon. Members have highlighted so fantastically, gather various bits of capability and knit that into one big package to sell to the Government. That would feel more expensive and slower to the Government, but it could be cheaper in the long term, in some instances.

That said, I and colleagues are overwhelmed almost daily by individuals in the UK defence industry reaching out on LinkedIn or by email, begging the Government to listen to what they are offering. They are patriotic people who think they can save us money and give us strategic advantage by delivering a piece of capability, when we currently spend obscene amounts of money on something that sometimes does not work well or produce the desired effect. I would love the Minister to give us a sense of what the Government are going to do differently from previous Governments to actively offer a forum for those SMEs to pitch their capabilities. I am immensely proud of the Secretary of State and the Minister who joins us today for their work so far—

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order.

5.15 pm

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland) on securing this important debate.

SMEs are the backbone of the UK economy and a vital part of our defence industry. They bring agility, innovation and high-quality jobs to communities across the country. Yet despite their immense potential, SMEs face significant barriers to fully contributing to our national defence procurement. There is a real and long-standing problem across the MOD's defence procurement system: it is beset by inefficiencies, including delays, overspend and rigid processes.

Liberal Democrats believe it is time for a fresh, ambitious approach to tackle those challenges. Our plan focuses on flexibility, accountability and long-term strategy. We would replace the current rigid system of defence reviews with a more flexible system of continuous reviews of security threats and evolution of defence plans. That would enable procurement to evolve in response to emerging security threats and rapidly advancing technologies. Further, we would integrate defence procurement into a comprehensive industrial strategy. That would ensure a reliable pipeline of equipment procurement, safeguard jobs and skills, and promote UK-based businesses.

Collaboration with NATO and European partners is key to developing cutting-edge technologies and ensuring interoperability. For the areas of defence where we wish to maintain our sovereign capabilities, we must achieve that through greater collaboration with domestic SMEs. The survival of SMEs, such as small technology businesses, is dependent on their ability to develop and deploy innovative products at extraordinary speed. They are configured for agility, fast-paced decision making and recruitment of high-value talent.

By contrast, Government organisations, including the MOD, operate within more complex mandates and constrained budgets. It is neither realistic nor efficient for the Government to attempt to replicate the private sector's pace of innovation. The MOD must improve its procurement processes to leverage the agility of SMEs.

Mr Dhesi: I thank the Lib Dem defence spokesperson for allowing me to intervene. The Procurement Act 2023 was intended to make it easier for small businesses to access public sector procurement. Does she agree that it is now for the Government to set out clearly what other support will be made available to already busy SMEs, to remove the complexities and barriers as they seek to gain contracts within the pipeline?

Helen Maguire: I absolutely agree and will come to that later in my speech.

By focusing its limited research and development budget on adapting high potential dual-use technologies for defence purposes, the MOD can maximise innovation while delivering value for taxpayers. Furthermore, by involving more SMEs, we can manufacture critical components locally, reducing security risks associated with reliance on non-NATO or non-European allied suppliers. That approach also spreads the economic benefits, stimulating regional economies, creating jobs and fostering innovation.

Defence contracts provide stable revenue streams, enabling SMEs to invest, scale up and contribute more broadly to the economy. The previous Conservative Government let small businesses down. They created chaos and uncertainty when businesses needed certainty and stability, especially in the aftermath of the pandemic. Liberal Democrats are fighting for a fair deal for SMEs, starting with overhauling the unfair business rates system and providing more support with energy costs.

The current state of SME participation in MOD procurement is underwhelming. Only around 5% of the procurement budget is allocated to SMEs; 42% of contracts go to the same 10 suppliers. That is simply not good enough and we can do better. We welcome the announcement of a new defence industrial strategy, and we hope it is completed swiftly so that businesses can plan. I especially welcome that one of the six priorities of the strategy is to prioritise UK businesses, and another involves fostering a more diverse community of suppliers, including non-traditional SMEs. We will hold the Government to account on sticking to those priorities.

Ultimately, I want to see the strategy turn into meaningful action. SMEs need simpler access to contracts and reduced bureaucracy, including help to overcome defence-related banking challenges and support to compete on a level playing field with the largest suppliers. It is time for the Government to unlock the potential of SMEs to fuel local economies, increase the UK's defence sovereignty and lead on innovative technologies.

5.20 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland) on securing an excellent and very timely debate. If I may say so, as someone who ran an SME, was involved in public procurement, and was Minister for Defence Procurement, this is a subject that gets my pulse racing. Perhaps I am an anorak, but it certainly does—particularly considering the changing nature of warfare and its extraordinary impact on procurement, which he rightly mentioned. Of course, we are talking about Ukraine.

There has been much criticism of procurement in recent years, and the Minister for the Armed Forces was pretty damning yesterday, but I am incredibly proud of what we did in government, uniquely in the world, in standing by Ukraine. That was one of the greatest procurement achievements in our country's recent history. We shipped out there the NLAW—made in Belfast, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned—despite legal advice to the Government that we should not. Ben Wallace took the risk, with the full support of then Prime Minister Boris Johnson, and we stood by Ukraine. If we had not, it may have capitulated, which would have been terrible for world peace.

That reminds us of the ethical importance of supporting the defence sector. Peace is the No. 1 ethical goal of the UN, but to have peace we need defence, and for that we need a thriving defence sector. Too often, we hear an ESG—environmental, social and governance—narrative that we should not invest in defence. As I understand it—it was in *The Times*—20 defence companies have either been advised against attending careers fairs because of safety fears or decided to cancel under pressure, which is shocking.

I have two specific questions for the Minister on ESG. Can she confirm that, in reviving the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023, the Government will seek to strengthen how protest against defence companies is dealt with on campus? The Chancellor mentioned in a speech yesterday the importance of opening up investment in the UK from our pension funds. She is 100% correct about that, but can the Minister confirm that we will be clear to those pension funds that investing in defence is ethically positive because it helps support the security of our country and the wider world?

Let me make a couple of economic points. When we talk about investment, we must understand the importance of laying out the pathway to 2.5% quickly. ADS, the trade body for SMEs in defence, is worried about the procurement freeze, tightening—whatever we want to call it—in the MOD, which is undoubtedly happening, and its impact on cash flow and confidence among defence SMEs, at a time when they are facing higher tax costs, regulations and so on. I hope that the Government can bring forward the pathway to give businesses the confidence to keep investing in the defence sector.

Equally, there is much to be positive about. The hon. Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor was absolutely right to say that because war is changing, procurement needs to change, and SMEs must play a huge part in that. There are some features of the integrated procurement model I announced that I think are particularly important. One is export. The hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) mentioned the Jackal, and he mentioned the Czech Republic, where I made my first ever trade visit. The Jackal was proudly on display, and I sincerely hope that that deal is successfully concluded. That underlines how, to support the defence sector, we need international market success, because our market is not big enough to support our defence sector.

Perhaps the most important point, which several colleagues referred to, is accessibility for SMEs. They can feel that it is difficult to penetrate the defence procurement system. As Minister, I spoke many times about the most uplifting experience I had in procurement, which was visiting an SME that had developed a drone that was being used in Ukraine. That is obviously very sensitive, but I can say that it had cutting-edge capability. When I was there, that SMEs was getting feedback within hours. To get that, there has to be access, at a secure level, to frontline data, so we wanted to develop far more engagement with defence SMEs at “Secret”. I strongly recommend to the Minister continuing to create that feedback loop between industry and Government, so that SMEs know what is happening.

Finally, on dual use, I was determined to recognise—if I had had more time in government, perhaps I would have got further with this—that there are so many brilliant companies in our economy that probably do not think about getting involved in defence. We need to fire up that talent base and get them involved in defence procurement, particularly in areas such as software, because that is what will drive procurement going forward. If we get the funding in place, back our defence companies and send the signal that investing in defence is morally right because of the threats we face, then we can look forward to a bright future for our defence companies.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): We have gained a few minutes. I ask the Minister to leave a couple of minutes at the end for the proposer of the debate to wind up.

5.25 pm

The Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry (Maria Eagle): I will certainly do that, Mr Stringer. This debate has been excellent, and it is good to see so many colleagues in the Chamber to participate, even if they could not make the length of speech that perhaps they had hoped. None the less, everybody was able to get the nub of what they wanted to say into the debate. For that we have my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland) to thank, because it is he who secured the debate; I congratulate him on it. I welcome this debate on the involvement of SMEs in defence procurement because this is an issue, as my hon. Friend and many others have said, that is of critical importance to the future of our military and to our capacity to deter potential adversaries.

We all know that Britain faces acute and growing dangers—conflict in the middle east, the war in Ukraine and tensions in the Indo-Pacific—and we also know that our armed forces have been underfunded and hollowed out over the last number of years, which is why we are having a root-and-branch strategic defence review to assess these threats and develop the capabilities we need to counter them. It is why we are boosting spending this year by just under £3 billion in real terms, and why we are going to set out a pathway to 2.5% of GDP on defence. I am not going to repeat everything that was said in the House yesterday on this, but I realise that it is a matter that everybody across the House is concerned about.

Our armed forces are only as strong as the industry and procurement system that supports and equips them. The procurement system itself was described during the last Parliament by the Public Accounts Committee as “broken”. It is clear that changes need to be made. My hon. Friend the Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor set out some of what he wants to see, including the ability to respond more swiftly to the changing face of warfare. A number of Members, including the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), have set out some of what they have seen, during their time in this place, of that effort being achieved, particularly in respect of the support we have been giving over the past few years to Ukraine. There is nothing like an emergency situation like that to ensure that we innovate. It is important that we learn the lessons of that innovation for our procurement more generally.

I am particularly concerned, as is my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor, to get SMEs more involved in our procurement processes. He made a number of suggestions, as did other Members around Westminster Hall, of how we might be able to do that. The hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) mentioned Supacat, which I saw last week at the international armoured vehicles conference. Everything he said about Supacat is correct. It is an excellent example, and the hon. Gentleman was able to provide the Chamber with numbers in relation to jobs and the improved economic growth in his area that it is able to provide. That is precisely the kind of thing that we want the new defence industrial strategy, when it is published, to be able to pursue and do better with.

[Maria Eagle]

The hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) said rightly that MOD spend in Northern Ireland is less than in some regions of England, and he quoted some numbers. He is quite right, but there is no indication that SMEs over there have less ability to innovate or to provide services of the type that the MOD needs. I hope to be able to do precisely what he asks and increase that number. I will be visiting in due course, not too far in the future, and I hope to hear from some of the SMEs that he and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—who is, unusually, no longer in his place—talked about.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Chris McDonald) talked about the Teesside defence and innovation cluster and some of the companies in his constituency. He is right: I promised him a visit—I think we are trying to organise it now. When I am considering which proposals to take forward in the defence industrial strategy, before it is published, it is tremendously helpful to hear directly from SMEs about their experience. I have already done some of that and, between now and the end of the consultation, I will be doing as much, in as many regions, as I possibly can, in all of our nations around the UK. I hope to be in a position to get a good sense of the big issues that smaller companies are raising with us.

My hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Chris Evans) was passionate in making his points about late payment; this is not the first time that he has raised that issue in parliamentary settings. The Government do recognise the importance of fair payment practices. Direct suppliers to the MOD are required to sign up to the prompt payment code to be eligible for MOD contracts. The Director General Commercial recently wrote to large suppliers to remind them of that responsibility because some are better at complying than others.¹

My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth Moor View (Fred Thomas) argued, “Let us not decide that all defence primes are evil”—I think that is the word he used. I thought that was going a bit far, but his point was that they are not the enemy; they can be part of the solution. There are examples of good practice, where primes have been very clear about involving small, innovative, agile companies. There are some examples that are not so good, and we need to improve the way in which small firms engage with MOD contracts, whether directly or through contracting with a prime on a particular programme.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Steve Yemm) asked me to visit. I think I have offered to visit absolutely everybody else in Westminster Hall, so it would be churlish of me to say no to him. I cannot promise to visit before the end of February, but I can promise to come and see some of what his constituency has to offer. It obviously has a long history of engineering and of working hard in tough industries. I look forward to that visit. He mentioned that he is visiting a firm that supplies products across domains, and it sounds like he will have an interesting time.

I look forward also to dealing with the points made by the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire). I was glad to hear her say that she is in favour of a comprehensive industrial strategy because the defence

industrial strategy that we are going to bring forward is part of a thorough, countrywide industrial strategy for all Departments. She will recall that that strategy identified defence as one of the eight growth sectors on which we ought to rely to improve economic growth and spread prosperity across the nations and regions—and that is what we want to do. In fact, the defence industrial strategy that we will bring forward will act as the sector action plan for that broader strategy, so we will be joining up.

The hon. Member for South Suffolk raised the issue of protest-related activity on university campuses and what that means for the ability of defence companies to recruit the best talent. This Government recognise the crucial importance of attracting new entrants to the defence sector. Obviously, university campuses provide a way of engaging with young people who might want to work for existing companies or set up their own and get involved in the defence sector. We do need to do that. We are working closely with the Department for Education and with Skills England to address the skills landscape in the defence sector. Part of that is about making sure that young people at educational institutions such as universities can get the full range of information, at university careers fairs and so on. I hope that between all of us we can make an improvement, to the extent that there is a problem that was identified by *The Times*.

James Cartlidge: I think what everyone wants to see from the defence sector is that we champion the ethical value of investing in defence because it delivers security, and in doing so challenge those who protest as if these companies were somehow out there to harm us.

Maria Eagle: I agree with that and I think there would not be too much disagreement across the House of Commons about that. I think it is something we can agree on, and that we should try to get that sense out there. Increasingly, as people see the increasingly dangerous world we are living in, there is the capacity for any concerns that there might have been about defence in the past to be seen properly in context, and for it to be seen that actually, defence is a key part of our ability to continue with our way of life as we choose in a democracy.

I have a couple of minutes left before I hand over again to my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor. It has been an excellent debate. In many ways we have not had enough time to get through all the contributions that colleagues around Westminster Hall would have wanted to make, but as I go about trying to deal with our defence industrial strategy, it is helpful for me to hear from colleagues, just as it is helpful for me to get around the country as much as I can to listen directly to SMEs. It helps make sure that the policy prescriptions we come out with in the defence industrial strategy are the right ones; that we can change procurement in a way that will assist SMEs to have full involvement as they wish in defence procurement; and that we can spread prosperity and economic growth across all our regions in England and all the nations of the UK. That is the prize in front of us, and that is what we can do if we get this right.

5.37 pm

Alan Strickland: I thank the Minister for her strong leadership on this vital issue. We have discussed these matters on a number of occasions and I know the Minister

1.[*Official Report*, 30 January 2025; Vol. 761, c. 3WC.](Correction)

is committed to really driving this priority through the defence industrial strategy and the wider strategic defence review, which I strongly welcome.

I also thank hon. Members around Westminster Hall for what I think has been a strong shared sense of purpose about the importance of tapping in to our innovative small businesses to meet the challenges we face. We have heard about the real pride in defence contractors around the country from the hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord), my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Steve Yemm) and my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Luke Myer). We have heard of the importance of ensuring that economic growth across the country is driven by the defence industry from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister). We have also

heard really important points about payments from the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Chris Evans). I thank the Minister and everybody who has taken part today.

We have all acknowledged that the global threat is growing, becoming more complex and evolving much more quickly. There has been broad agreement that part of the answer is ensuring that we can open up more opportunities to small, nimble, agile high-tech SMEs across the United Kingdom which can be at the forefront of helping us and our allies to meet this challenge.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered SME participation in defence procurement.

5.39 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 28 January 2025

BUSINESS AND TRADE

UK Trade Envoy Programme

The Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Jonathan Reynolds): The Secretary of State has today appointed 32 Parliamentarians covering 79 markets to the United Kingdom's trade envoy programme.

The United Kingdom's trade envoys will play an integral role in the Government's growth mission and delivering our plan for change by helping to create opportunities for UK business to compete abroad, break into new markets and attract greater inward investment from their markets.

They will play a crucial role in supporting my Department's growth priorities, in particular through helping deliver the industrial and trade strategies and attracting foreign direct investment to every region in the UK. They complement the work of our ambassadors, high commissioners and His Majesty's trade commissioners in their respective markets by engaging with their host Governments, leading trade delegations, hosting inward delegations, meeting businesses in the UK and in market, and lobbying on market-access issues.

The role as a United Kingdom trade envoy is unpaid and voluntary with cross-party membership from both Houses.

The Secretary of State is pleased to appoint:

The hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney MP) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to North Africa.

The hon. Member for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi MP) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to Egypt.

The hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Calvin Bailey MP) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to Southern Africa.

The hon. Member for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman MP) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to Morocco and Francophone West Africa.

The right hon. Baroness Ramsey of Wall Heath (Jane Ramsey) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to Ethiopia.

The hon. Member for Clapham and Brixton Hill (Bell Ribeiro-Addy MP) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to Ghana.

The hon. Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Flo Eshalomi MP) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to Nigeria.

The hon. Member for Edmonton and Winchmore Hill (Kate Osamor MP) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to East Africa.

The hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Rosena Allin-Khan MP) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to South Africa.

The right hon. Lord Spellar of Smethwick (John Spellar) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to Australia.

The hon. Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris MP) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to New Zealand.

The right hon. Lord Watson of Wyre Forest (Tom Watson) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to the Republic of Korea.

The right hon. Lord Faulkner of Worcester (Richard Faulkner) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to Taiwan.

The hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah MP) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to Indonesia and ASEAN.

The hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western MP) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

The hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman MP) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Brunei.

The hon. Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Sharon Hodgson MP) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to Japan.

The hon. Member for Manchester Rusholme (Afzal Khan CBE MP) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to Türkiye.

The hon. Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel MP) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to Ukraine.

The right hon. Lord Austin of Dudley (Ian Austin) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to Israel.

The hon. Member for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky MP) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to Switzerland and Lichtenstein.

The right hon. Lord Alderdice (John Alderdice) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to Azerbaijan and Central Asia.

The right hon. Lord McNicol of West Kilbride (Iain McNicol) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to Jordan, Kuwait and Palestine Territories.

The hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin MP) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to Pakistan.

The hon. Member for Liverpool Walton (Dan Carden MP) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to Mexico.

The hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton MP) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to Southern Cone.

The hon. Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton MP) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to Commonwealth Caribbean.

The right hon. Lord Liddle (Roger Liddle) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to Andean.

The hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister OBE MP) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to Brazil.

The hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden MP) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to Central America.

The right hon. Lord Hannett of Everton (John Hannett OBE) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to Sri Lanka.

The right hon. Baroness Winterton of Doncaster (Rosie Winterton DBE PC) as the United Kingdom's Trade Envoy to Bangladesh.

The new title of United Kingdom trade envoy programme better reflects the envoys' duties in representing the whole United Kingdom, with the support of the Prime Minister, Secretary of State and Ministers.

[HCWS392]

EDUCATION

Early Years Qualifications

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan): Having high-quality early education and care available on parents' doorsteps is key to giving children the best start in life. In our plan for change, we have set a milestone of a record proportion of children starting school ready to learn. We will measure our

progress through 75% of five-year-olds reaching a good level of development in the Early Years Foundation Stage assessment.

A key priority to achieve this milestone is rolling out Government-funded childcare support to improve access. Eligible working parents are already benefiting from the latest phase of the expansion of childcare in September 2024, being able to access 15 hours a week of early education and childcare from the term after their child turns nine months. And from September 2025, this will increase to 30 hours per week as we deliver the final phase of the expansion.

In our plan for change, we committed to work in partnership with the sector, reforming training and support for the workforce to drive up standards. To make it easier to recruit and train the right staff, the Government are working to expand the workforce to deliver the high-quality early years provision needed. We are introducing new routes to becoming approved as early years educators and early years teachers. We are also making it easier for educators and employers to check their qualifications and know that they are working within the early years foundation stage requirements.

Early years teacher degree apprenticeship

The Government have worked with sector experts to create a new undergraduate route to achieving early years teacher status, through the publication of a new early years teacher degree apprenticeship. The apprenticeship complements the existing early years initial teacher training route and is designed for those wishing to specialise in teaching young children and babies. It enables people starting out in their careers, as well as experienced early years educators, to gain a degree and become an early years teacher without needing to incur any debt while gaining invaluable experience at work. This three-year course will be available throughout England and will help ensure we have a highly qualified workforce to support the next generation of young children and help settings recruit the staff they need.

Experience-based route

Following last year's technical consultation, the Government intend to proceed with the introduction of an experience-based route for early years staff. This new

route will support the recruitment and retention of staff by allowing suitable educators who do not hold an approved qualification to be included in the staff-child ratios at level 3 following the successful completion of a period of supervised practice. Early years providers and educators will be able to begin using the experience-based route from 3 March 2025, and we will work closely with the sector in the coming months to ensure that employers and educators understand how to deliver the route and realise the benefits.

The qualification, experience and process requirements for the route will safeguard quality by ensuring only staff with the right experience and qualifications can access the route, that the duration of the process allows for sufficient development of skills and knowledge, and that providers maintain an appropriate number of fully qualified staff. These requirements were supported in the consultation response, and in response to sector feedback we have increased the required experience of assessors and supervisors in this route from six months to a minimum of two years.

Check an Early Years Qualification service

Early years qualification requirements can be difficult to understand, particularly when determining whether a qualification is approved for working in staff-child ratios. We have developed the "Check an Early Years Qualification" digital service to help managers check the approval status of qualifications held by existing and prospective staff. We expect this to save managers' time and increase their confidence in having sufficient, appropriately qualified staff to meet the demand resulting from the expansion of funded childcare entitlements by September 2025.

The service has been tested with individuals and organisations working in the early years during its pilot and iterated in line with feedback. It will be made publicly available on www.gov.uk later this spring.

Together, these new measures are just the latest steps this Government are taking to grow and develop a valued early years workforce, who provide the high-quality provision that supports children and families right from their earliest years.

[HCWS391]

Petition

Tuesday 28 January 2025

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

The Lower Thames Crossing

The petition of residents of the constituency of Sevenoaks, including Swanley and the Dartford Villages,

Declares that the Lower Thames Crossing is crucial to easing the relentless congestion at the Dartford Crossing, which impacts thousands of residents every day; further declares that recent disruptions across the Dartford

Villages, Swanley, Crockenhill, South Darenth, and Farningham have highlighted the urgent need for this project to progress without more delays; and notes that traffic congestion frequently results in missed medical appointments, slower commutes, and interruptions for emergency services trying to reach those in need; and further notes that an online petition on this matter has received 1318 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take immediate action to expedite the delivery of the Lower Thames Crossing to alleviate the severe congestion and improve the lives of residents in the affected areas.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by *Laura Trott.*]

[P003038]

Written Corrections

Tuesday 28 January 2025

Ministerial Corrections

DEFENCE

Russian Maritime Activity and UK Response

The following extract is from the statement on Russian Maritime Activity and UK Response on 22 January 2025.

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

[*Official Report*, 22 January 2025; Vol. 760, c. 1029.]

Written correction submitted by the Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey):

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

PRIME MINISTER

Engagements

The following extract is from Prime Minister's questions on 22 January 2025.

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

The Prime Minister: We do need flexibility in our schools. If the Leader of the Opposition had hopped off social media for a while, she would have seen the amendment put down this morning to achieve that end. [*Official Report*, 22 January 2025; Vol. 760, c. 999.]

Written correction submitted by the Prime Minister, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer):

The Prime Minister: We do need flexibility in our schools. If the Leader of the Opposition had hopped off social media for a while, she would have seen the amendment **announced yesterday** to achieve that end.

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