

**Tuesday  
4 February 2025**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

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

**Tuesday 4 February 2025**

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# House of Commons

*Tuesday 4 February 2025*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Fuel Poverty

1. **Chris Law** (Dundee Central) (SNP): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of fuel poverty. [902531]

18. **Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to tackle fuel poverty in winter 2024-25. [902548]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Miatta Fahnbulleh):** The previous Government's record on fuel poverty was absolutely woeful, and we have had to inherit an incredibly challenging trajectory. We are doing everything we can to shift that by upgrading homes for families in fuel poverty, driving up standards in the rental sector so that we lift 1 million people out of fuel poverty and supporting over 3 million households with our warm homes discount, all while running with our mission for clean power.

**Chris Law:** Despite Scotland being one of the most energy-rich nations in Europe, decades of mismanagement by different colours of UK Government—whether Labour or Conservative—have led to a shocking one third of households in Scotland living in fuel poverty. That number is set to rise, along with energy bills. The Government were elected on Labour's pledge to cut energy bills by £300, but yesterday the chair of GB Energy admitted that that was “not in its remit” and was completely unable to say when bills would come down, alleviating fuel poverty. If this is not another broken promise from the Prime Minister, can the Secretary of State confirm exactly when in this parliamentary term consumers in Scotland will see that reduction?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** Fuel poverty is devolved in Scotland. The Scottish Government have had the opportunity to make a dent in this problem for almost 20 years and they have not. Even now, as we are ramping up upgrades to help people with fuel poverty, the Scottish Government are raiding more than £200 million from retrofitting funds that could help families today. I will take no lectures from the hon. Gentleman on how we tackle this problem.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Wendy Chamberlain. She is not here. I call Frank McNally.

**Frank McNally** (Coatbridge and Bellshill) (Lab): I commend the Minister for the announcement of support for those in most need this winter. Given Scotland's colder climate, does the Minister share my view that, as she has just expressed, the Scottish Government's decision to cut £200 million from the retrofitting budget is failing people in Coatbridge and Bellshill and across Scotland, and that with record funding from this UK Government in the Budget, they should reverse that cut?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** My hon. Friend is completely right. There is no justification for raiding retrofitting budgets, because we know that is the route by which we upgrade people's homes to deliver homes that are warmer and cheaper to run. We are doing our bit to drive down energy bills and deliver clean power, which is the route to energy security and financial security. The Scottish Government need to crack on and do their bit.

#### Renewable Energy: Workers' Rights

2. **Chris Webb** (Blackpool South) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support workers' rights in the renewable energy sector. [902532]

**The Minister of State, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (Sarah Jones):** The Government came into office six months ago and are determined to ensure that clean energy jobs are high quality, well paid and secure, with strong trade unions. I want to take this opportunity to commend EDF Renewables for its recent recognition agreements with three trade unions. Through the Office for Clean Energy Jobs, we are working with industry and trades unions to support fair pay and workers' rights, and ensuring that workers across the country can benefit from the economic opportunities of the net zero transition.

**Chris Webb:** Data centres at Blackpool's proposed high-performance data centre campus Silicon Sands will be powered by renewable energy and cooled by liquid immersion techniques, with the excess heat repurposed into neighbourhood buildings and homes. Silicon Sands could lead the way in an environmentally friendly approach to data centres, while creating thousands of well-paid jobs for my home town. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how the Department can support my vision to build a better Blackpool?

**Sarah Jones:** I would of course be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to talk about this great project, Silicon Sands, which will bring jobs and be really innovative for his area. The wider point is really important—for too long, our coastal and industrial communities have not had the job opportunities they deserve. We are determined to change that.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Can the Minister assure the House that her ambitions for renewable energy can be achieved without Chinese slave labour?

**Sarah Jones:** Yes—of course, we ensure that the highest standards are kept in all these things. The Government's position is to make sure that we are very careful about them. The right hon. Gentleman may be referring to solar, which is a particular issue that people have raised. We have a solar taskforce, which has been set up exactly to look at those points.

Several hon. Members rose—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** Order. I know that Members will find it unusual that Mr Speaker has left the Chair during questions. It is because he is going to attend the memorial service for Lord Hoyle, so I am sure that the whole House wants to send our best wishes to him.

### Energy Suppliers: Winter Support for Consumers

3. **David Williams** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): What discussions he has had with energy suppliers on support for consumers during winter 2024-25. [902533]

9. **Michael Wheeler** (Worsley and Eccles) (Lab): What discussions he has had with energy suppliers on support for consumers during winter 2024-25. [902539]

11. **Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): What discussions he has had with energy suppliers on support for consumers during winter 2024-25. [902541]

12. **Ms Polly Billington** (East Thanet) (Lab): What discussions he has had with energy suppliers on support for consumers during winter 2024-25. [902542]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Miatta Fahnbulleh):** We know that this winter has been difficult for many people who are struggling with high energy bills. We agreed the winter support package with industry and Energy UK to get support to the people who need it, and £500 million is being provided through industry. When combined with the support that we are providing through the warm home discount, that amounts to £1 billion for the families who we know need help this winter.

**David Williams:** As well as residents, businesses in the ceramics sector struggle with high energy bills and face many other pressures. Sadly, only yesterday more than 80 workers in my constituency lost their jobs when Royal Stafford, a historic ceramics manufacturer for nearly 200 years, went into liquidation—a devastating blow for the workers and their families. Will the Secretary of State meet GMB officials, Ceramics UK and me as a matter of urgency to explain how the Government will support the ceramics sector, protect jobs, and tackle the serious difficulties that energy-intensive industries face in decarbonising?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** My hon. Friend is right to point out that we need to reduce energy bills for businesses, including those in energy-intensive industries. I was sorry to hear about the job losses in his constituency, and one of the ministerial team will be happy to meet him. I must add, however, that this is exactly why we are running our clean power mission. We see that the route through which we can drive down bills is breaking our dependence on global fossil fuel markets over which we have no control, in order to take ourselves off the rollercoaster of price rises and price hikes that is so damaging to businesses. While we do that, we are working with Ofgem and industry to ensure that businesses are

not being locked into expensive contracts, and to ensure that they have much stronger redress when things go wrong.

**Michael Wheeler:** I thank the Minister for all her work in this area. I know from conversations with my constituents that energy costs are a large part of the cost of living crisis for them. Following the Conservative party's failure to protect our energy system and invest in home-grown clean power, can the Minister give us an update on what steps are being taken to tackle my constituents' high energy bills?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** My hon. Friend is 100% right. The reason we are so exposed as a country to global fossil fuel markets and the rollercoaster that is damaging business and hurting consumers is the Conservative party's failure to invest in home-grown clean power and to upgrade people's homes to insulate them from high prices. That is a record of which the Conservatives should be ashamed, and it is a record that we are determined to change.

**Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): Many households in my constituency are struggling with high energy bills because the last Government left us exposed to the unpredictable fossil fuel market. Does the Minister agree that the only way in which to protect residents in my constituency and across the country permanently is to unlock clean power that we control here in the UK?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** My hon. Friend is completely right. Every solar panel and every wind turbine that we put up takes us closer to delivering the energy security that we need to achieve financial security for families. That, combined with our drive to upgrade people's homes, is what will protect households in the long term. It is the central mission of this team, this Department and this Government, and it is why we are running at clean power by 2030.

**Ms Billington:** In anticipation of the energy market reform that the last Government neglected to carry out, I look forward to hearing confirmation from my colleagues on the Front Bench that we may be able to find a way of insulating people in the long term—for the transition to decarbonising heat, for example. Can my hon. Friend confirm that, in future, we may be able to have a social tariff that protects the most vulnerable from the excesses of energy prices?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** I agree with my hon. Friend that we urgently need to tackle the challenge of affordability. Energy is not a luxury good; it is foundational, and for too many people, this essential good is not affordable. A social tariff is one mechanism of responding to this, and there are different ways in which that can be implemented. We are looking at all the options, to ensure that families can get this essential good at more affordable prices.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): People living in rural locations disproportionately live in housing stock that is older and colder and does not have gas. In the Minister's discussions with energy suppliers, will she please not forget to talk to the suppliers of liquefied petroleum gas and oil, since many of our constituents—particularly with the withdrawal of the winter fuel payment—are suffering a great deal?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** We are very alive to the issues in rural communities, and we are working to ensure that there are solutions for all types of homes. We had record applications to our boiler upgrade scheme for heat pumps, a large number of which were from rural households. We are very clear as we roll out our plan that there will be a solution for every single household, so that everyone can benefit from homes that are warmer and cheaper to run.

**Calum Miller** (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): This winter, many of my constituents are concerned about energy outages. Last Thursday, the Cooper school and Glory Farm school had to close for the entire day when they lost all electricity supply. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can ensure the grid has the capacity to avoid these outages, which are so damaging to homes, businesses and critical public services?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** Yes, we will meet the hon. Gentleman. We are working to ensure that outages are not the norm. This is obviously linked to weather issues that we are having to respond to, but the team has been working to ensure that households are not put in a difficult situation, and when they are, that we are responding as quickly as possible.

**Dave Doogan** (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): What would help bill payers is the £300 cut to energy bills that the Labour party promised in its manifesto. Instead, bills went up £149 in October, they went up £21 in January, and they are going up again by £99 in April. Can the Minister explain where the source of this departmental ineptitude lies, and would she like to apologise to the people of these islands for writing cheques that her party cannot cash?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** The hon. Member explains exactly why we need to wean ourselves off fossil fuel markets. That is why it is critical that we deliver clean power by 2030—that is the central mission of this team, and we are running at it. The Scottish Government do have the levers to protect households in fuel poverty. Before the hon. Member criticises us, they should get their house in order and get on with the job.

**Sir Ashley Fox** (Bridgwater) (Con): Prior to the election, the Secretary of State promised to cut my constituents' energy bills by £300. Would the Minister repeat that promise at the Dispatch Box?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** We have a manifesto commitment to reduce energy bills by £300. We are doing everything we can. We have a legacy of record high energy bills. We are running at clean power because we think that is the route to delivering lower energy costs. We are upgrading people's homes because we know that is the route to delivering homes that are warmer and cleaner to run. We are doing everything we can. The Conservative party oversaw a crisis for households, so before its Members start lecturing us on what we should do, they should be hanging their heads in shame.

#### **National Wealth Fund: Opportunities for Industry**

**4. Patrick Hurley** (Southport) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on opportunities for industry under the national wealth fund. [902534]

**The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ed Miliband):** The national wealth fund is an essential part of our clean energy and growth missions. Recent investments include £20 million of investment into XLCC, a subsea cable manufacturer, to develop a new facility in Scotland, creating 900 jobs; £28 million of investment into Cornish Metals to finance lithium production, supporting more than 300 local jobs; and £1 billion, working with Barclays and Lloyds, to upgrade social housing, giving people warmer homes and lower bills.

**Patrick Hurley:** I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. In the Liverpool bay area, just off the coast of my Southport constituency, we already have a number of wind farms, including the Burbo Bank scheme. Can he outline to the House what more his Department is doing to ensure that, as we put up these wind farms, jobs are created in constituencies like mine?

**Ed Miliband:** My hon. Friend asks a really important question, which Members from right across this House will agree with. The situation we have inherited from the last Government is that Germany has almost twice as many renewables jobs per capita as Britain, Sweden almost three times as many, and Denmark almost four times as many. Through a combination of Great British Energy, the national wealth fund and a clean industry bonus, we are making sure that we do not just build offshore wind in this country, but reap the huge industrial opportunity from it.

**Harriet Cross** (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Will the Secretary of State confirm that the Court of Session's judgment on Rosebank and Jackdaw was to do with their consents, not their licences? When he comes to consider his decisions on those consents, he should do so on the basis that these are existing, not new, licences.

**Ed Miliband:** That is an individual planning case, so I will be careful about what I say. What I will say to the hon. Lady is that the last Government made an unlawful decision, according to the court. We are going to follow due process.

**Louise Haigh** (Sheffield Heeley) (Lab): GB Nuclear is about to make two decisions on small modular reactors, and I know my right hon. Friend will agree that those SMRs and their supply chains should be built here in the UK. Although we have the capability in Sheffield, we do not necessarily have the capacity, so will he work with me, my colleagues and businesses in Sheffield to look at proposals for a nuclear manufacturing centre of excellence?

**Ed Miliband:** I welcome that question from my right hon. Friend, who is a fantastic champion of these issues. We will look at any proposal in detail, but she makes such an important point, which I would make to all Members of this House. People will have different views on this issue, but clean energy is the economic opportunity of the 21st century—whether it is small modular reactors, offshore wind, hydrogen or carbon capture. In our first six months, this Government have shown what it means to deliver at pace on the investments that this country needs.



**Alex Easton** (North Down) (Ind): Has the Secretary of State engaged in any discussions with Northern Ireland industries on the strategic use of the sovereign wealth fund?

**Ed Miliband:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I discussed this issue in detail in advance of the preparation of the Great British Energy Bill, and it is also relevant to the national wealth fund. We want our institutions to serve all countries in our United Kingdom, and I encourage him and industries in his constituency to make applications to the national wealth fund, which is there to support people and industries across the UK.

**Nick Timothy** (West Suffolk) (Con): The Government policy to decarbonise the grid by 2030 rests on the National Energy System Operator's assumption of a £147 per tonne carbon price, but manufacturers are lining up to tell the Energy Secretary that it would destroy British industry. Will he guarantee today that for the remainder of this Parliament, we will have a lower carbon price than Europe?

**Ed Miliband:** NESO made that assumption, but it does not reflect our assumption that the carbon price will be significantly lower. I will not start predicting market prices. What I will say to the hon. Gentleman is that the difference between him and us is that he believes that we should double down on fossil fuels as the answer to the problems facing the country, whereas we know that clean energy is the way forward.

#### Clean Power by 2030

5. **Peter Prinsley** (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): What progress he has made on achieving clean power by 2030. [902535]

**The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ed Miliband):** Since this Government came into office, we have taken a series of steps to deliver clean, home-grown power for Britain, including lifting the onshore wind ban, consenting to nearly 3 GW of solar and overseeing the most successful renewables auction in history. In December, we published our clean power action plan, which has been widely welcomed by business as providing the route map that simply did not exist under the previous Government.

**Peter Prinsley:** Energy projects in East Anglia will be crucial for generating the clean, cheap power that this country needs to grow, from wind and solar farms to nuclear power stations, including the much-needed Sizewell C. These projects will bring high-skilled jobs to East Anglia, including in my constituency of Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket. What action are the Government taking to ensure that the infrastructure improvements to connect these projects to the grid will not be hamstrung by the planning process?

**Ed Miliband:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question and congratulate him on his advocacy. Members across the House have a decision to make here. As the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for Peckham (Miatta Fahnbulleh), said earlier, we are exposed to fossil fuels and we see what is happening in global markets with prices going up. If we want to change that and have clean home-grown power that we can control, we have

to build the infrastructure we need. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) on supporting it and on supporting our planning reforms, and I urge Members across this House to do the same.

**Sir Roger Gale** (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): Given that the British taxpayer is paying billions of pounds in subsidies to fell trees in Canada and ship the wood across the Atlantic to burn in the Drax power station, can the Secretary of State tell the House where the clean energy lies within that? Has he read the KPMG report? If he has, will he come to the House and make a statement on his assessment of it?

**Ed Miliband:** The last Government consulted on what, if any, future support there should be for biomass power stations. We are studying that consultation and we will make a statement in due course.

**Catherine Atkinson** (Derby North) (Lab): Community energy projects can help us achieve clean energy by 2030. Darley Abbey Community Energy is surging ahead with plans for 100 kW Archimedes screw on the River Derwent—the same river that powered the world's first factory 200 years ago. The project could generate enough hydroelectricity to power all the businesses at Darley Abbey Mills, but there are hurdles in place, including planning permission, insurance costs and the need for up-front capital. What can the Government do to support local renewable community projects such as these to succeed?

**Ed Miliband:** My hon. Friend makes a fantastically important point, which is that we often think about planning reform as being about the large-scale projects, but it is also about unblocking the smaller-scale projects. Having a national energy policy statement that includes 2030, working with local authorities and making sure there are enough planners to make the decisions—all those things can all make a difference. I congratulate my hon. Friend on her advocacy for this work, and I congratulate the local community on this project.

**Carla Denyer** (Bristol Central) (Green): Experts are clear that the savings from the Government's clean power action plan will be wiped out by 2050 if airport expansion at Heathrow, Gatwick and Luton goes ahead, and that relying on so-called sustainable aviation fuels would use up to half the UK's agricultural land. Does the Secretary of State agree with the scientists that, while ambitious clean power plans are hugely welcome, if this Government also back airport expansion, they are not going to meet their climate obligations?

**Ed Miliband:** As the Chancellor said last week, any aviation expansion has to take place within carbon budgets and environmental limits. I would also point out that this Government have achieved more in six months than the last Government did in 14 years. We have lifted the onshore wind ban, consented nearly 3 GW of solar, set up GB Energy and the national wealth fund and held the most successful renewables auction in history. This Government are delivering on clean power.

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

**Joy Morrissey** (Beaconsfield) (Con): To achieve his clean power plan, can the Secretary of State say exactly what local communities need to do to convince him that solar farms on agricultural lands are not appropriate in their area?

**Ed Miliband:** It is quite extraordinary. We are absolutely exposed as a country, yet the Conservatives oppose clean power. They have a blanket opposition to clean power, so let every person in the country know that when energy bills remain high, they are opposing the things that will bring them down. It is quite extraordinary. This is the Conservative party that lost the last general election—its worst defeat in 200 years—yet if anything, since the election, Conservative Members have got worse and learned nothing.

**Joy Morrissey:** The Secretary of State recently approved a 524-hectare solar farm in Lincolnshire—a farm linked to Dale Vince, a £5.4 million donor to the Labour party. The public have a right to be certain that this decision was carried out properly, so will the Secretary of State refer his conduct of this application to the independent adviser on ministerial standards? Yes or no?

**Ed Miliband:** I am glad the hon. Lady asks, because I took no part in this decision—I recused myself. *[Interruption.]* Here we go. They have nothing to say about the country, just desperate scraping of the barrel. Let the whole House hear that they oppose a solar plan that will put up solar panels throughout the country and give clean power to the British people. The state of the Conservative party is something to behold.

#### Off-grid Communities: Energy Prices

6. **Charlotte Cane** (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): What steps he is taking to support off-grid communities with energy prices. [902536]

15. **Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): What steps he is taking to support off-grid communities with energy prices. [902545]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks):** Our commitment to make Britain a clean energy superpower is the only way to protect bill payers permanently. The Government are determined to support all households with their energy costs, including those that are off grid, and eligible low-income households are being supported with the warm home discount. I urge households off the gas grid to contact their electricity supplier, if they have one, to see what support they can receive.

**Charlotte Cane:** Many of my constituents, as well as being off grid, have homes built of non-standard materials—clunch or wattle and daub—and those homes are also often listed. What support will the Minister provide to my constituents who are looking to retrofit their homes to move away from oil and improve insulation?

**Michael Shanks:** The hon. Lady is right that, particularly in rural areas, certain house types are often much more difficult to heat due to much older building materials and a lack of insulation. The Minister for Consumers, my hon. Friend the Member for Peckham (Miatta Fahnbulleh), is working to make sure our warm homes plan can reach all communities and all types of households,

and I encourage the hon. Member for Ely and East Cambridgeshire (Charlotte Cane) to feed in any ideas for how we can do that for these rural and off-grid households.

**Jamie Stone:** Every winter, Altnaharra in my constituency is the coldest place in the UK. I can think of lots of pensioners who are faced with the invidious decision of whether to switch off and shiver or to run into debt. It occurs to me that the Department for Work and Pensions may well have a database of these people, so will His Majesty's Government get the DWP to work with the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero to identify them and give a helping hand?

**Michael Shanks:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that helpful point. Where we can co-ordinate information and data across Government to identify people who need more support, we will do so. My Department is currently working with the Department for Work and Pensions to release as much of that information as possible, and we hope that we will be able to make progress in due course.

**John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that new oil and gas developments will not give us energy security? As the fossil fuels they produce will be sold internationally, they will not lower bills and they will undermine our climate commitments.

**Michael Shanks:** My hon. Friend is, of course, right to say that, even if oil and gas are extracted from the continental shelf, they are sold on the international markets. The companies that extract the oil and gas are in the business of trying to make as much profit as possible and will sell to the highest bidder, so it does not protect prices for consumers in this country. We were clear in our manifesto that we will not issue licences for new exploration and new fields, but that we will continue to support those licences that have already been issued. Our future does not lie in more oil and gas; it lies in clean power, which is why we are moving at pace to deliver that.

#### Warm Homes Plan

7. **Anna Dixon** (Shipley) (Lab): What steps he is taking to introduce the warm homes plan. [902537]

10. **Deirdre Costigan** (Ealing Southall) (Lab): What steps he is taking to introduce the warm homes plan. [902540]

16. **Jessica Toale** (Bournemouth West) (Lab): What steps he is taking to introduce the warm homes plan. [902546]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Miatta Fahnbulleh):** The warm homes plan will upgrade up to 5 million homes with low-carbon solutions such as heat pumps, solar and insulation to deliver homes that are warmer and cheaper to run. We have already kick-started delivery, with up to 300,000 homes being upgraded this year alone. We will set out our plans in the spring on how we will ramp this up.

**Anna Dixon:** In 2023, it emerged that a number of substandard retrofitting works were carried out as part of Government schemes. In some cases, properties were left with structural damage. When households sought redress, they found that many of the authorised contractors had folded, and they have been left to pick up the bill. Will the Minister assure me and my constituents in Shipley that, under the warm homes plan, sufficient safeguards will be put in place to protect households from rogue companies?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** My hon. Friend raises an important point. We are aware of too many cases where home upgrades have not been done to the required standard. We are very clear that the ad hoc, fragmented system of regulating home upgrades that we inherited from the last Government is in dire need of reform. We will overhaul that system so that when people have home upgrades, they can be confident that they will be of the highest standard and that when things go wrong, they will have as much protection as possible and redress within the system.

**Deirdre Costigan:** The previous Government were content to sit back and allow developers to build homes that have locked people into years of expensive and dirty gas heating. How will the Minister ensure that the 1.5 million new homes the Government will deliver will not keep people dependent on outdated and costly gas heating systems?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right; the new homes we build must be fit for the future and must be decent homes that comply with our carbon standards. We are working with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to bring forward the future homes standard, and we will set out our plans for that in due course.

**Jessica Toale:** I have been shocked by the number of mouldy and damp homes that I have visited in my constituency. No one should be forced to live in such conditions. We have some of the leakiest homes in Europe as a result of the last Government's failure to deal with the problem. Will the Minister tell me how our warm homes plan will improve housing conditions and bring down bills for my constituents in Bournemouth West?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** Cold, damp homes that are hard to heat are the reality for too many households in this country. That is the legacy of the party opposite and a legacy that we are absolutely determined to turn around. We are committed to upgrading homes in the rental sectors with our minimum energy efficiency standard so that we can make cold, draughty homes a thing of the past. We will ramp up our warm homes plan so that my hon. Friend's constituents and constituents across the country will benefit from homes that are warmer and bills that are lower.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): Will the Minister acknowledge the amazing contributions of groups such as New Forest Friends of the Earth, which this very morning have been lobbying their MPs in Parliament Square on warm homes initiatives? They will be coming to the Government with some possibly

costly proposals, but I hope that the Government, despite the economic legacy that they allegedly inherited, will give them a sympathetic hearing.

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for reminding us about our economic inheritance. We are reaching out to organisations and stakeholders across the country—industry, charities and third sector organisations—to feed into our warm homes plan, so we are keen to hear ideas. We are conscious that we have an ambitious programme and we need to do a big scaling-up of home upgrades across the country, so we are definitely in the market for hearing from and reaching out to organisations that can come up with ideas.

**Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): Is it not a fact that, regardless of how much money is put into a warm homes scheme, social tariffs or whatever, consumers can never be insulated against the massive cost of the mad net zero policy that will require thousands of new turbines, acres of solar farms and miles of new transmission lines, all at a cost to the consumer? How on earth does the Minister believe that we will deal with the issue of fuel poverty in this country with that cost?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** I will say to the right hon. Gentleman that at the moment, families are not insulated from fossil fuel markets. We have seen one of the worst energy crises, which has had a huge impact on the cost of living. The status quo is not tenable. We already have record-high energy prices and the only way that we are going to bear down on that is through clean power. The alternative is to do nothing—but we have seen the impact of doing nothing over the last 14 years and consumers and constituents across the country are the ones being impacted. We will absolutely drive forward with clean power by 2030 because that is our route to providing an energy system that delivers energy security and that can deliver financial security.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister came to the House previously and gave us some encouragement about the warm homes scheme and how it has been discussed with the regions, the Northern Ireland Assembly in particular. Since that statement, has she had the opportunity to speak to the relevant Minister in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment in Northern Ireland to ensure that we can all gain from the warm homes scheme, which the Minister is proposing in a positive fashion?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** We are speaking to all the devolved Administrations. We are constantly engaging with them, including in our inter-ministerial group. On this specific issue of home upgrades and how we drive up standards, we are working with the Scottish, the Welsh and the Northern Ireland Administrations.

### Home Insulation Schemes

8. **Andrew George** (St Ives) (LD): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of Government-funded home insulation schemes. [902538]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero** (**Miatta Fahnbulleh**): Home insulation delivers warm homes and lower bills. I have visited Government-backed schemes across the country and seen their impact on households and consumers, but we



also know that there are too many examples of homes not being upgraded to the required standard. We are not happy or comfortable with that. We are committed to overhauling system so that when people have home upgrades, they can be confident that they will be of the highest standard and that, if things go wrong, they will have redress so that we can take them on this journey with us.

**Andrew George:** Further to the questions raised by the hon. Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon) and several other hon. Members, I, too, have picked up numerous cases in my constituency of Government-sponsored defective home insulation work and of extortionate, poor-quality and defective work of unscrupulous cowboy contractors who masquerade as operating under Government schemes. This includes Mrs King in Helston in my constituency who has paid out £19,000 to have insulation installed and then removed. I am pleased with the Minister's response, but surely the Government need to do more to give householders confidence that these projects are both cost-effective and provide proper redress.

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** The hon. Gentleman is right: it is just not good enough for any householder to get a home upgrade that is not up to standard. I am sorry to hear about the example of Mrs King. We are working with Members across the House on supporting a number of individual cases. If it is a Government-backed scheme that is at fault, mechanisms are in place for the work to be remediated at low cost. But, at the end of the day, we have acknowledged that the system requires root and branch reform so that when consumers opt for upgrades they can have the confidence of knowing that they will deliver what we are saying: warm homes that are cheaper to run.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** I call the Chair of the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee.

**Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): Next week, the Select Committee will be hearing from some of the victims of the botched solid wall insulation installed under the previous Government's energy company obligation and GB insulation scheme. That includes people whose homes may well have to be rebuilt, as the cost of repairing the damage may be higher. Will the Minister tell us how such a thing could have happened, and will she confirm that she is happy to come back to the Select Committee to add to the comments that she has already made about rebuilding consumer confidence after the disaster under the previous Government?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** What is clear to us as a new Government is that the system of regulating home upgrades was too ad hoc and too fragmented. Accountability was not clear enough and consumers were not at the heart of the system. We are committed to turning around that system. Put simply, when someone has a home upgrade, they need to have the confidence that it will work for them and that, when things go wrong, redress will be put in place. I am committed to update the Select Committee on the progress that we are making on getting a grip of what we have inherited and on making sure that such a thing never happens again for consumers.

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

**Pippa Heylings** (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): As we have been hearing, Dickensian conditions of cold, damp and mouldy homes are shamefully on the increase. In my constituency, more than 4,000 households are having to make that difficult decision between eating and heating because of the previous Government's dither and delay on insulation. However, even now, local authorities and families are in limbo, anxiously awaiting confirmation of the 2025-26 funding for ECO4 and the Great British Insulation scheme through a ministerial statement. Will the Minister act with the urgency that is needed to bring those schemes and the warm home scheme forward to tackle fuel poverty?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** I thank the hon. Member for pointing out the inheritance and the legacy. That is material, because it is the backdrop to everything we are trying to do. We are clear that we need to drive forward with momentum and pace. That is why we are already upgrading up to 300,000 homes this year alone. It is also why we are working with local authorities and social housing providers to deliver warm homes that are cheaper to run for communities across the country. We are absolutely moving at pace with our warm homes plan. We will be setting out that plan, and at its heart is an ambition to ramp up the number of upgrades massively, so that more families across the country can benefit from what we know works: warm homes and lower bills.

### Electricity Bills: Standing Charges

13. **Victoria Collins** (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): What assessment he has made of the potential implications for his policies of recent trends in levels of standing charges for electricity bills. [902543]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Miatta Fahnbulleh):** We know that people are frustrated with standing charges, and we are committed as a Government to reducing them. As an initial step, the regulator Ofgem is consulting on giving people the option of no standing charge tariffs within the price cap, and we will continue to work with the regulator to ensure that we lower standing charges in the fairest way possible.

**Victoria Collins:** Lesley from Tring is one of my constituents who just missed out on the winter fuel allowance. She said she will be "spending most of the winter in bed"

because she is struggling with energy costs. While so many are struggling with the cost of energy, standing charges disproportionately affect those on lower incomes such as Lesley. Will the Government meet Ofgem to discuss those disparities and prepare detailed action to review standing charges for a fairer system?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** I am sorry to hear about the case of Lesley, and I know there are people across the country who have this frustration with standing charges. I reassure the House that we have a commitment to reducing them. We are working with Ofgem on a set of options. Our challenge is to ensure that standing charges do not penalise some households and that they are as

fair as possible. That is what we are committed to doing, and that is what we are working every day to deliver.

#### **Energy-based Development: Mid Buckinghamshire**

**14. Greg Smith** (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of energy-based development proposals in Mid Buckinghamshire constituency. [902544]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks):** I congratulate the hon. Gentleman not just on this question, but on securing an Adjournment debate last night on exactly the same subject. As I stated last night, clean power projects in his constituency and across the country are vital to achieving our clean power mission, which will give us energy security and bring down bills for families. Of course, all proposals are assessed on their individual merit through the planning system, and where communities host infrastructure, the Government believe they should directly benefit from it.

**Greg Smith:** In answering my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) earlier, the Secretary of State completely dismissed the legitimate concerns of rural communities and farmers who are being asked to take on energy projects. Yet last night in the Adjournment debate, the Under-Secretary found a more reasonable tone, accepting the point on cumulative impact in constituencies such as mine that are being asked to take up to 3,000 acres of projects. Will the Under-Secretary go into more detail about how the Government will put in mitigations on cumulative impact to protect communities such as mine?

**Michael Shanks:** I would be testing the patience of the Deputy Speaker if I were to go into more detail than I could in an Adjournment debate. The point I made clearly to the hon. Gentleman was that it is not a credible position for him to take that there should be absolutely no infrastructure built anywhere in his constituency. The reality is we need to build new infrastructure, not just energy infrastructure but right across the public sector. I have said clearly that the work we are taking forward on the strategic spatial energy plan and on the land use framework by colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is about trying to ensure that we manage the best use of land, but we will have to build new infrastructure, and communities will have to host it.

#### **Great British Energy: Regional Offices**

**17. Mr Bayo Alaba** (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): Whether he has made an assessment of the potential merits of establishing a Great British Energy office in every region. [902547]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks):** We announced that Great British Energy's headquarters will be in Aberdeen, recognising the decades of experience in that city as the energy capital of Europe and our determination to invest in good, well-paid jobs in the city. With £8.3 billion-worth of investment behind Great British Energy, it will deliver economic value and jobs right across the supply chain across all parts of the country,

including in my hon. Friend's constituency. Great British Energy is the right idea for our time: public ownership, investment in supply chains and the reindustrialisation of our nation.

**Mr Alaba:** I commend the Minister on the progress he has made on setting up Great British Energy. Can he outline to the House what opportunities our publicly owned champion will bring to Southend East and Rochford and the wider south-east region?

**Michael Shanks:** My hon. Friend is right. Of course, the Great British Energy legislation is still going through Parliament at the moment; we hope that process will conclude soon, but in the meantime, hard work has been taking place to identify all the opportunities for Great British Energy to invest. Both Opposition parties—the SNP and the Conservatives—seem to oppose Great British Energy. Every single investment that it makes, every job that it creates, and every part of the supply chain that it incentivises will be delivered by Great British Energy against the SNP and the Conservatives, who have opposed it at every single stage. I ask them to rethink their position on what is a publicly owned champion to deliver for communities, create good, well-paid jobs, and deliver the clean power future that we need as a country.

**Graham Stuart** (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): We heard from the chief executive officer of Great British Energy the other day. He said that it was not in his brief to cut bills by £300. What is Great British Energy for, then? It turned out that the jobs were not going to materialise either, so how will the Government make sure that we do not have some bureaucrat job-creation scheme in every region of the country, as the Minister's Back Benchers are calling for, but actually have a company that invests in things that otherwise would not be invested in? Technologies such as wind and solar are already investable, so will Great British Energy focus on those things that need to be brought closer to market?

**Michael Shanks:** The right hon. Gentleman strongly makes the case for the importance of a publicly owned energy champion investing in parts of the energy system that are not currently getting that investment; I appreciate his recognition of that. What the interim chair of Great British Energy said very clearly—of course, it has not appointed a CEO yet—and what we have said consistently is that Great British Energy's headquarters in Aberdeen will of course create jobs, but the majority of the jobs that will be created by that investment will come from the investment that Great British Energy makes in supply chains, in projects, and in developing the clean power that we need. Great British Energy will champion the industries that the right hon. Gentleman speaks about and deliver jobs in this country to reindustrialise communities, and Conservative Members will have to explain why they are against those jobs when they are created, including if they are created in the right hon. Gentleman's constituency.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

**Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): It was refreshing yesterday to have some clarity on Great British Energy's plans, not from the Secretary

of State or from Ministers—that would be asking far too much—but from the Manchester-based chairman of the Aberdeen-based company, Juergen Maier. He stated that cutting energy bills is a “very long-term project”—not £300 by the next election, then—and that the Aberdeen headquarters, if we can call it that, will employ only 200 to 300 people, far from the 1,000 initially promised, although that may come in 20 years’ time. On behalf of the tens of thousands of energy workers worried for their future, and indeed the millions watching their energy bills rise yet again, can I ask the Minister whether he agrees with the now very interim chairman?

**Michael Shanks:** The shadow Minister must be the only Member of Parliament representing Aberdeenshire who is against investment in Aberdeenshire. He will have to explain to his constituents and businesses right across his community why he stands up and opposes investment in his constituency. Of course, in doing so, he misunderstands the role that Great British Energy will play; the key point of it is that it will invest £8.3 billion over the lifetime of this Parliament in clean power projects right across the country, helping to unlock private sector investment and create supply chains in this country. The shadow Minister has now turned his face against all of those jobs that will be created in Aberdeen, which is a question he will have to answer for his constituents.

**Andrew Bowie:** The Minister has a right cheek to come to this Chamber and talk about protecting jobs in Aberdeenshire, when tens of thousands of energy workers are going to lose their jobs because of this Government’s decisions on the North sea. The British people were promised lower bills by the next election; now, they have been given a vague assurance that in the very long term bills might come down, and they are meant to be grateful for that.

The arrogance of this Government is staggering, if not surprising. They are so driven by ideology that they will not even allow Government lawyers to defend licences issued for Rosebank and Jackdaw, and are willing to see imports of fracked gas increase as long as they go down in history as the Government who shut down the North sea. While pensioners freeze as the Minister’s Government strip them of the winter fuel allowance, and as people are made unemployed due to his Government’s position on the North sea, can the Minister see why people across this country are quite miffed that the Government get to waste £8 billion of their money on the GB Energy white elephant?

**Michael Shanks:** First, let us be absolutely clear that Great British Energy will invest in clean power projects right across the country, including in the shadow Minister’s constituency. Secondly, he has an absolute cheek to come to this Chamber and talk about jobs in oil and gas, when more than 70,000 jobs were lost in North sea industries over the past decade—the shadow Minister was in the Energy Department for at least a chunk of that time. The truth is that a transition is under way in the North sea. Conservative Members were quite happy to bury their heads in the sand and pretend that it was not happening as thousands of people lost their jobs. This Government are determined to build what comes next; the shadow Minister stands opposed to that, and he will have to explain to his constituents and the people of Scotland why he does not support that investment.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** That brings us to topicals, and questions and answers will have to be very brief.

### Topical Questions

T1. [902556] **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Ed Miliband):** In recent weeks, we have seen continuing rises in prices in global fossil fuel markets, with wholesale gas prices last month 60% higher than a year ago, which is caused by a number of factors. I want to be clear with the House: as long as Britain remains so dependent on fossil fuels, we will be in the grip of these global markets controlled by petrostates and dictators, with direct impacts here at home. The only way to get off this rollercoaster is with clean, home-grown power that we control, and that is what the Government’s clean energy mission is all about.

**John Lamont:** The Scottish Borders has some of the most beautiful countryside in the whole of the United Kingdom, but it is going to be destroyed by the massive pylons being built by ScottishPower Energy Networks in pursuit of Scottish Government and UK Government policy. Does the Secretary of State think it is right to charge ahead with these plans, which are firmly opposed by local communities?

**Ed Miliband:** I say to the hon. Gentleman, and I have said it throughout this Question Time, that local communities should have a say, but we have a decision to make as a country. Do we build the clean energy infrastructure to protect us from volatile fossil fuel markets, or do businesses, families and the public finances—£94 billion was spent during the energy bills crisis—remain exposed? I know what I would choose: we protect ourselves.

T2. [902557] **Oliver Ryan** (Burnley) (Lab/Co-op): Green energy is the economic opportunity of the 21st century, and in an ever more unstable world, home-grown renewables are critical to our security and self-sufficiency. What will the Secretary of State do to make sure that Burnley, Padiham and Brierfield, and places like those, benefit from new green jobs growth?

**Ed Miliband:** My hon. Friend asks a really important question. The whole point of our clean industry bonus is to incentivise British manufacturing. That is so important for the country, and it was not done by the last Government. We are determined that his constituents and constituents across the country will benefit.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

**Andrew Bowie** (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): This Government’s ideological obsession with intermittent renewables at the expense of stable, clean, baseload nuclear power will, we think, be their greatest mistake. They have delayed the small modular reactor down-selection competition, and we have not heard a peep about the final investment decision on Sizewell C. However, none of that comes close to the monumental act of self-harm of deciding to throw away and bury—out



of reach, underground—20 years of nuclear-grade plutonium, which could be used to drive forward a nuclear revolution in this country. How does the Secretary of State think this will play with the pro-growth, pro-nuclear MPs in his own party who are already worried about him being a drag on growth?

**Ed Miliband:** First, may I take this opportunity—I know we are short of time, Madam Deputy Speaker—to congratulate the permanent shadow Energy Secretary, the right hon. Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho), on the birth of her baby boy? I am sure the whole House will want to join me in congratulating her. I also congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his temporary elevation.

On the issue of plutonium disposition and the decisions I and my hon. Friends have made, we are acting on the best advice we have inside Government. It has the potential to create thousands of jobs—thousands of long-term jobs—and it is the right thing to do not just for jobs, but for nuclear safety.

T3. [902558] **Dr Marie Tidball** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): Stocksbridge Speciality Steels in my constituency has world-leading specialist capability to produce high-grade steel parts currently used in aerospace. I am proud of this Government's steel strategy, which will ensure we buy British for new infrastructure, and Great British Energy provides an ambitious opportunity to bring down bills and ensure energy security. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss the potential for using specialist steel capacity at Liberty Steel in Stocksbridge for new, net zero energy infrastructure?

**The Minister of State, Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (Sarah Jones):** South Yorkshire has a proud history of steelmaking, as I saw for myself when I was at Sheffield Forgemasters last week. We saw a huge reduction in steel production in this country on the last Government's watch, and we want to turn that around, which is why we are delivering a steel strategy. As ever, I would of course be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to talk about how we can make this work.

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

**Pippa Heylings** (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): While we eagerly await progress on bringing community energy into the Great British Energy Bill when it comes back to this House, will Ministers reassure community groups around the country that they will enlarge and expand the community energy fund of £10 million, which is so successful that it is currently oversubscribed?

**Ed Miliband:** I know that the hon. Lady has had long discussions with the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen (Michael Shanks), on these issues. We are absolutely determined that, as part of Great British Energy, community energy will be massively expanded. That was our manifesto commitment, and that is what we will deliver. Hon. Members around the Chamber have asked how their community can benefit, and community energy will be an essential part.

T4. [902559] **Ruth Jones** (Newport West and Islwyn) (Lab): In my constituency of Newport West and Islwyn, we have ever-expanding semiconductor facilities and data centres. The primary mission of this Government is growth, but that growth could be stifled if there is not sufficient grid capacity alongside these exciting innovations. What is the Minister doing to make sure that south Wales has sufficient grid capacity to support these advances and facilitate much-needed growth?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks):** My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Although we are clearly on the sprint to deliver clean power by 2030, demand for electricity in this country is likely to double by 2050. Our reforms around connection to the grid are important—they will make sure that there is space for demand projects, such as data centres, to connect—but so is building the grid for the future, so that we have capacity in our network to deliver on our growth aspirations.

T5. [902560] **Bradley Thomas** (Bromsgrove) (Con): Can the Minister assure the House that as the Government push to decarbonise the electricity grid, the vast majority of new electricity generation and transmission infrastructure will be built in the UK, not imported from foreign countries, including China?

**Ed Miliband:** We are absolutely determined to build the manufacturing base in this country. I mentioned the investment in XLCC. That is a crucial part of building the supply chains. The supply chains have been eroded over a decade or two; we are determined to build them up.

T8. [902563] **Peter Prinsley** (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): Looking around the car park in Parliament, I noticed that we had only two charging ports, both occupied. By supporting the installation of more charging ports in Parliament and other workplaces across the country, we can encourage more people to make the environmentally friendly switch to electric vehicles. What measures are the Government taking to promote the installation of charging ports in workplaces?

**Michael Shanks:** I cannot speak on behalf of the House of Commons authorities, but under the building regulations of 2021, all new non-residential buildings and those undergoing major renovations must install charging infrastructure. In government, along with colleagues in the Department for Transport, I hosted roundtables yesterday, and I will host another today, on how we can unlock much more investment in charging infrastructure, because that is critical in supporting the transition to electric vehicles.

T6. [902561] **David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I took part in last week's very successful Nuclear Week in Parliament, and was pleased to see so many officials from the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero engaging in it, but the dark cloud on the horizon for me and my constituents is that the Scottish National party Government in Scotland still use the planning system to block new nuclear development, and the jobs and economic opportunities that it brings. What can the UK Government do to promote new nuclear development in Scotland?



**Ed Miliband:** I have huge respect for the right hon. Gentleman and completely concur with him on this issue. Nuclear is an essential part of our clean energy future. The demand for electricity in the years ahead—there will be a 50% increase by 2035, and demand will probably be double, if not more, by 2050—means that we need all the technologies at our disposal: renewables, nuclear and others. The SNP is 100% in the wrong place on this, but I am glad to say that Scottish Labour is in the right place.

**Harpreet Uppal** (Huddersfield) (Lab): When I visited Birkby junior school, I saw that tackling climate change and pollution is one of its key priorities. Does the Minister agree that setting a strong nationally determined contribution at COP29 and committing to an ambitious clean power target is important in demonstrating that the Government are intent on tackling climate change, especially at a time when other global leaders are not?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Kerry McCarthy):** Last week, the UK formally submitted its NDC to the United Nations framework convention on climate change. It is a world-leading, ambitious target that we hope will demonstrate ambition to other countries. In that NDC, we have a youth clause for the first time, and I am very keen to talk to Members across the House about how we can better engage with schools, communities and young people to bring them on board with us as we seek to achieve our ambitions.

T7. [902562] **Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Will the Minister agree to meet the wonderful Cumbria Action for Sustainability and me to address some of the imperfections in the Government home insulation programme? It does not properly support older rural-community properties that are single-skinned, not so easy to insulate, and therefore not so easy to keep heated cheaply.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Miatta Fahnbulleh):** I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman. We know that we have a job to do to ensure that all insulation is up to standard and that we have the right measures for every type of household. I am keen to engage with him and Members across the House.

**Alistair Strathern** (Hitchin) (Lab): The UK has a fantastic £26 billion clean tech sector, leading the way in innovation and carbon reduction for everything from clean power to sustainable agriculture. However, all too often, red tape and bureaucracy are locking in dependency on fossil fuels and foreign oil and gas. How can we work across Government to cut back on this unnecessary red tape, and ensure that our schemes support the leading tech and innovation that our best-of-British producers are bringing forward?

**Ed Miliband:** There is huge potential, and with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, I will chair an artificial intelligence energy council, looking at not only how we can meet the future demands of AI, but how AI and technology can help us deliver the infrastructure and energy system of the future. My hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin (Alistair Strathern) makes an important point, which we will take away.

T9. [902564] **Vikki Slade** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): In the village of Shapwick in my constituency of Mid Dorset and North Poole, 20% of properties have been lying empty because their owners, Aster housing association and the National Trust, cannot afford to bring them up to standard. National Trust homes are typically solid-wall, thatched, not on mains gas, and listed. What plans are there to support the owners in achieving energy efficiency, so that we can get those properties occupied?

**Ed Miliband:** Let us be frank: the big prize that has eluded past Governments for a long time is a proper plan to upgrade all types of buildings, not just residential properties. The Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Peckham (Miatta Fahnbulleh), and I are working on that closely with colleagues from across Government. It is part of a bigger version of the warm homes plan, which is also about buildings. We will definitely take away the experience that the hon. Lady raises.

**Kirsteen Sullivan** (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): What engagement has the Minister had with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities council leaders on local power plans? Does he agree that a partnership approach by Government, councils and community organisations, such as the West Lothian Climate Action Network, is key to the success of local power plans?

**Michael Shanks:** I agree with my hon. Friend. The local power plan is a key part of what Great British Energy will deliver. It will give communities the power to develop local power projects wherever possible, and to achieve the social and economic benefits of doing so. We are engaging with a number of stakeholders across the UK. Because of the devolution settlement, our main contact will be with the Scottish Government, who have their relationship with COSLA, but we are determined that local government across the UK will help drive this forward, and will have the capacity to support communities in doing so.

T10. [902565] **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I thank the Minister with responsibility for energy consumers for agreeing to convene a roundtable tomorrow on the subject of radio teleswitching switch-off at the end of June. The problem will be particularly acute in communities like mine; we are well behind the rest of the country when it comes to smart meter roll-out. When she comes to the meeting, will she have a target for getting us the number of smart meters that we need?

**Miatta Fahnbulleh:** The right hon. Member is right to raise this issue. We have to deliver on the teleswitching transition. We are behind where we need to be, but we are working with industry and Ofgem to make sure that households are not left in the dark, and that everyone can upgrade to smart meters, which will be much better for them. I am keen to work with him and Members from all parts of the House to make sure that we get this right for his community and other communities that are affected.

**Sarah Champion** (Rotherham) (Lab): The Government procurement budget is around £300 billion. Can the Minister please tell us what percentage of his allocation

will go to British businesses? Will he confirm that where we have to import, no modern slavery will be imported into this country?

**Ed Miliband:** On the second question, I completely agree with my hon. Friend, who is an eloquent champion for tackling modern slavery. I know Members from all parts of the House share her view. We need to do better as a Government, in terms of the guidelines inherited from the last Government, and the solar taskforce is looking at those issues. Her first question relates to something that we are discussing with our colleagues in government. The economic and social value we can get as a country from the procurement budget is huge and untapped, and we need to do something about it.

**Josh Babarinde** (Eastbourne) (LD): The £80 million swimming pool support fund to help make pools more energy-efficient is facing a significant underspend before it expires in a few months' time. Will the Minister urgently meet Eastbourne borough council, Better, and me to discuss unlocking this national underspend to help fund solar panels and pool covers at Eastbourne Sovereign centre, where I learned to swim?

**Ed Miliband:** I am massively in favour of solar panels on swimming pools and lidos—I am an occasional lido user myself—so I am fully on board with the hon. Gentleman's point. I will pass it on to colleagues in government.

**Darren Paffey** (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): Southampton Itchen has many Victorian and inter-war homes that are poorly insulated and therefore expensive to heat, especially

as the Conservative party dragged its feet and did not invest in clean or affordable energy. What steps is the Minister taking to improve the insulation and energy efficiency of my constituents' homes?

**Ed Miliband:** This is hard, partly because of the fiscal backdrop, but we are working on a comprehensive plan so that we can help not just the poorest—we want to help those in fuel poverty—but people across the income spectrum through a more universal offer. If we can get funding for up-front investments, there will be massive paybacks; that is the chance. We all know that. It is a hard nut to crack, but we are doing our best to do so.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** Final question: Richard Tice.

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Energy suppliers are now forecasting that the energy price cap will go up in April by another 5%, making for some 16% since last summer. Will the Secretary of State tell the House when bills will come down—or will net stupid zero mean that they will only ever go up?

**Ed Miliband:** It is a particular pleasure to end with the hon. Gentleman. Here it is: a decision for all Members of the House to make. We are on the rollercoaster of the fossil fuel markets; we have no control over them. The mission of this Government is to take back control with clean, home-grown power. I urge him and Members across the House to support taking back control.

## National Cancer Plan

12.42 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Andrew Gwynne):** With permission, I wish to make a statement on the national cancer plan. Today is World Cancer Day. Almost everyone in our country has been affected by cancer, either themselves or through a friend or relative. Having lost both my parents to cancer, I am so grateful to the Prime Minister for giving me this job. He has given me the chance of a lifetime to do my parents proud by creating the kind of compassionate and humane healthcare that all our constituents deserve.

I am also pleased to be led by a survivor of kidney cancer, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. His experience as a patient will be invaluable to us in the months ahead. I pay tribute to the amazing cancer charities who do fantastic work to help people live with cancer, support bereaved families and drive vital research in this area—Macmillan, Cancer Research UK, Cancer52 and Marie Curie to name just a few.

Lord Darzi's investigation set out the scale of the challenges that we face in fixing the NHS, and how desperately we need to improve cancer diagnosis rates, waits and outcomes. He found that

"the UK has substantially higher rates than our European neighbours, Nordic countries, and countries that predominantly speak English".

There were close to 100,000 more cases of cancer in 2019 than in 2001. While survival rates at one year, five years and 10 years have all improved, the rate of improvement slowed substantially during the 2010s.

Lord Darzi also noted important inequalities in the provision of cancer care; people in the most underserved areas are more likely to present as an emergency. As Cancer Research UK pointed out in its submission to the investigation, the 62-day target for referral to treatment has not been met for almost 10 years. Last May, performance was at just under 66%, with more than 30% of patients waiting longer than 31 days to start radical radiotherapy.

For all those reasons and more, we do not have a second to waste. That is why the Prime Minister kicked off this year with our elective reform plan, setting out how we will cut the longest waiting times from 18 months to 18 weeks. From March next year, around 100,000 more people every year will be told if they have cancer or not within 28 days, and around 17,000 more people will begin treatment within two months of diagnosis. That is why this year, we will spend £70 million on replacing older radiotherapy machines with newer, more efficient models. That is why in the King's Speech we put forward an improved Tobacco and Vapes Bill, helping to reduce around 80,000 preventable deaths and putting us on track to a smoke-free UK.

While around 40% of cancers are caused by avoidable factors such as smoking, the backdrop is one of an ageing society. Cancer Research UK has forecast half a million cancer cases each year by 2040. We are preparing for the future now, with our 10-year health plan for the NHS. The plan will set out the framework of reforms that we need to ensure better outcomes and to meet the growing challenges that we face in the fight against this dreadful disease. The plan will play to Britain's strengths

as a global leader in the development of advanced therapies, using our strong academic and life sciences industry.

We should remember that the NHS was the first health service in Europe to commission CAR-T cellular therapy for blood cancer patients. On this World Cancer Day, I can announce that we will build on that legacy by investing in a cutting-edge, world-leading trial to transform breast cancer care through artificial intelligence. Nearly 700,000 women will take part in this trial, testing how cutting-edge AI tools can be used to catch breast cancer cases earlier. Thirty testing sites across the country will be enhanced with the latest digital AI technologies, ready to invite women already booked in for routine screenings on the NHS to take part.

The technology will assist radiologists by screening patients to identify changes in breast tissue that show possible signs of cancer, with referral for further investigations if required. If the trial is successful, it has immense potential to free up hundreds of radiologists and other specialists across the country to see more patients, tackle rising cancer rates and save more lives. It is just one example of how British scientists are at the forefront of transforming cancer care, and of the promising potential of cutting-edge innovations to tackle one of the UK's biggest killers.

This Government know that unless we do things differently, our NHS will remain in the dire state in which we inherited it. That means proper reform, from doing away with burdensome process that holds back frontline staff to handing more power to local leaders so that they can deliver for the communities they know best. It also means embracing new technologies, including AI, to transform the way we deliver care and to improve patient outcomes. Today's trial is yet more evidence of this Government taking action to bring in the reform that is desperately needed. As the Prime Minister set out last month, our plan for change will put the UK on the front foot, unleashing AI to drive up health services and shift the NHS from analogue to digital, as part of our 10-year plan.

Our 10-year plan will ensure that the NHS is there for our grandchildren and future generations, but we believe that the increasing number of cancer cases and the complexity of cancer care mean that we need a specific approach to cancer. We are determined both to bring down the number of lives cut short by cancer and to ensure that many more people go on to lead a full life after their treatment. That is why I am today announcing a call for evidence for our new national cancer plan that we will publish following the 10-year plan in the second half of this year. We will look at the full range of factors and tools that will allow us to transform outcomes for cancer patients while improving their experiences of treatment and care. We will make the United Kingdom a world leader in cancer survival by fighting the disease on all fronts—through better research, diagnosis, screening, treatment and prevention. However, we cannot do this alone, and that is why we are launching this call for evidence from patients, doctors, nurses, scientists, our key partners and other members of the public on what should be included.

To support that work, we will relaunch the children and young people's cancer taskforce, co-chaired by the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenege) and Professor Darren Hargrave, with Dr Sharna



[Andrew Gwynne]

Shanmugavadivel as vice-chair. I've put my teeth in—apologies if I pronounced that wrong. The taskforce will bring together the country's top experts to set out plans to improve treatment, detection and research for cancer in children, which will feed into the plan. At every stage, we will ensure that patient voices are heard. I look forward to updating the House on the progress of the plan, the taskforce and the trial throughout the year.

Many of us on the Government Benches remember with pride the previous Labour Government's record in the fight against cancer. We introduced landmark legislation to ban smoking in public places, protecting a generation of children from the harms of second-hand smoke, while putting record sums into smoking cessation programmes. At the dawn of the millennium, we launched a national cancer plan, which led to faster cancer diagnosis and treatment times, increased funding for cancer services, equipped the national health service with radiotherapy machines—many of which are still there—and expanded cancer research funding, so that a new generation of scientists could answer the call. What did that plan lead to? Survival rates went up. The number of patients diagnosed and treated on time went up. The number of lives lived well after cancer went up. That was our record in government, and we will do it again. I commend this statement to the House.

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

12.52 pm

**Dr Caroline Johnson** (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement, and I thank all the NHS workers, charities, scientists and others working to help those with cancer.

We can all agree that tackling cancer should be a top priority for the NHS. From diagnosing people quickly to starting treatment quickly and using the latest technology and drugs, we all want to see improvements. The recent trends in cancer survival rates are positive. The one-year survival rate for cancer increased by 5.9% between 2010 and 2020, and the five-year survival rate increased by 4.3% in the same period. Despite those improvements, we are not yet where we want to be, and we will be up front about that.

In government, we took action to catch cancer sooner and boost survival rates, with initiatives such as lung cancer screening and prostate cancer trials, and we welcome that Labour is continuing with that mission. We will work constructively with the Government on that, as we all want to achieve the same positive outcomes. However, the statement as a whole is rather disappointing. The Minister has told us that this is a cancer plan, but it is not; it is a statement that there is to be one. The Government saying that they want cancer survival rates to increase and that they are going to have a plan does not make it so—we need the plan itself.

The announcement of the AI trial in breast cancer is a welcome approach. Artificial intelligence has the capacity to revolutionise the way we diagnose disease, and I am delighted that the Government wish to explore those opportunities. We also very much welcome the relaunch of the children and young people's cancer taskforce, and are pleased it will be able to continue its valuable

work under the co-chairmanship of my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) and Professor Darren Hargrave. It is just a shame that the Labour Government wasted seven months by suspending the Conservative taskforce, only to reinstate it now.

I note the Minister's comments about waiting times to start treatment, and we agree that these must improve. I am sure it will not have escaped his notice that NHS Wales, which has been under a Labour Administration for 25 years, has a poorer performance, and I am certain he would not want party politics to affect such an issue. Can he tell the House what conversations he is having with his Welsh counterparts to improve cancer care there?

I am also concerned that last month, the Government appeared to quietly abandon the target of ensuring that patients receive treatment a maximum of 62 days from an urgent referral of suspected cancer, despite the Health Secretary having said before the election that a Labour Government would meet that target within the first term. Will the Minister clarify his commitment to the 62-day target?

More scanners are, of course, welcome, but what are the Government doing to ensure that there are enough trained professionals to interpret the results of the scans effectively?

With charities such as Macmillan and Marie Curie being hit with devastating increases in national insurance contributions, what help will be provided so that they do not have to cut back the vital support and guidance services they provide to cancer patients?

Anyone who has faced cancer will know that time is of the essence. The second half of the year—if it is not until December—could be quite a long time from now. Will the Minister therefore be more clear about when he intends to publish the plan? May I recommend using the evidence collected in our 2022 call for evidence, as well as the policies of the interim major conditions strategy, published in 2023, to speed up the plan? The quicker the Government act, the more lives they will be able to save.

**Andrew Gwynne:** I start by genuinely thanking the shadow Minister for the co-operation she has pledged as we seek to improve the outcomes for people with cancer. This is not a party political issue. We all want people to be diagnosed more quickly and to be put on the effective treatment pathways as quickly as possible, and we all want people to have better outcomes. I would just remind her, however, that while progress was made over the past decade, as I referred to in the statement, Lord Darzi clearly set out that the rate of progress was much slower than in comparator countries, and that we could and should have been on a much better trajectory.

That is why we are committed to a new national cancer plan—something for which the sector has been calling for some time. We are going to consult on that plan. I hope the shadow Minister is not suggesting that we should just pull a plan out of thin air without any consultation with the sector, patients or anybody with any interest in cancer.

Of course, things have changed over recent years. New technology has advanced and scientific progress is advancing, although there are still some areas where, stubbornly, there is not enough research. We need to build up the case for research and get the funding in;



I think especially of brain tumours, where, quite frankly, things have not progressed at all. We need to ensure that in the 10-year cancer plan, we really drive forward in some of those areas, using the latest technology and scientific advances.

The shadow Minister asked about targets. I just say to her that we have actually strengthened targets, rather than setting new ones for cancer. Currently, the NHS is on track to deliver against its cancer targets for this year. Yes, we should be ambitious where we can, and that is exactly what this Labour Government are going to do.

**Dame Siobhain McDonagh** (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I am delighted to announce to the House that we will be opening a drug trial for glioblastoma brain tumours in May, in memory of my late sister, Margaret. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] But for how long will progress on this depend on people baking cakes, running marathons and organising dinners? When will the NHS and the National Institute for Health and Care Research get their act together and do something for the 3,200 people who will be diagnosed with this dreadful illness this year?

**Andrew Gwynne:** I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. Those of us who knew Margaret miss her very much; she was such a towering figure in the Labour party for so many years, and we on the Labour Benches have a lot to thank her—and, indeed, my hon. Friend—for.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right on research. This is one area where, quite frankly, we have not done well enough. We have not made any progress. I know she will continue to champion more research. With our new national cancer plan, I hope that she will be pushing on an open door, because this is one area we absolutely have to do much better in.

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

**Jess Brown-Fuller** (Chichester) (LD): Nearly every family has a cancer story, whether it is a personal fight or that of a loved one. A 10-year plan from the Government is a welcome step, as the previous Government broke their promise to implement a 10-year cancer strategy that would have made a real difference to patients. We on the Liberal Democrat Benches are very proud that our cancer campaigner, my hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones), secured from the Government a commitment to introduce such a plan.

Testing for cancer, diagnosing and starting treatment quickly reduces stress and anxiety. Also, if the cancer is caught early, it is more likely to be treated successfully. Yet the target of 85% of people receiving their diagnosis and starting treatment within 62 days of an urgent referral has not been met since December 2015. In my constituency, one third of cases fall short of that target and 1,000 families lose a loved one every year to this cruel disease.

Lord Darzi's review laid out very clearly that the UK has appreciably higher cancer mortality rates than other countries and that more than 30% of patients are waiting longer than 31 days for radical radiotherapy. A quarter of England's 280 radiotherapy machines are now operating

beyond their recommended 10-year lifespan, and in some areas, such as West Sussex, there is no access to radiotherapy at all. That is why we welcomed the £70 million investment announced in October to start to replace the older radiotherapy machines.

Will the Minister confirm whether there will be further rounds of funding to keep pace with available radiotherapy technology? Will he look to support those at the mercy of a postcode lottery by ensuring that radiotherapy is available in all areas? What is the expected timeline for reversing the damage done by the previous Government, and when can all patients expect to start their treatment within the 62-day urgent referral target?

**Andrew Gwynne:** One reason we think a national cancer plan is so important is precisely to get the investment in the areas we need so that we can tackle those health inequalities. There are very real inequalities when it comes to the diagnosis of cancer and, more importantly, the treatment and therefore the outcomes. I am really keen that we focus on that in the plan, to ensure that all parts of the country achieve the best outcomes for people who have been diagnosed with cancer.

Part of the plan is the roll-out of community diagnostic centres so that we can get diagnosis much earlier. That then puts greater pressure on getting people through the front door for treatment, so that is why, as part of the recovery plan that the Prime Minister and the Health Secretary announced, we are seeking to get more people treated more quickly on those treatment pathways. Hopefully, that will get the desired outcomes we want. It is a commitment that we will seek to restore the national health service to its constitutional standards. That is a priority of this Government.

On radiotherapy machines, the £70 million investment will fund about 25 or so machines. The criteria for evaluating bids are the age of the machine, the proportion of machines aged over seven years, and the performance against the 31-day standard for radiotherapy, with poorer performers prioritised. On future rounds of funding, the cancer plan will feed into spending reviews and future Budgets. It is our priority to ensure that we reach the cancer targets, so hopefully we can make the case to the Treasury for future investment in further years.

**Derek Twigg** (Widnes and Halewood) (Lab): As someone who lost his wife to cancer, I know the dire circumstances that a cancer diagnosis can bring. It is right that cancer plans should focus on the best outcomes: improving the amount of time that people live for, or having a cure. I would like to raise with the Minister the specific issue of pain relief management. As part of the plan, will he ensure that there is an investigation into how pain relief management can be improved for cancer patients, and that it is given not just during the week but at weekends too?

**Andrew Gwynne:** Absolutely. My hon. Friend raises a really important point about how people receive pain relief and how that is managed. There are some really good examples out there of how it is done really well and, shockingly, there are some that are less good. We want to learn from the best. As my right hon. Friend the

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Secretary of State says, it is about taking the best of the NHS to the rest of the NHS. Absolutely, that should form part of the plan.

**Mr James Cleverly** (Braintree) (Con): Like many people in this House, I have seen up close and personal the devastating impact that a cancer diagnosis can have on people and families. I have also seen the difference between an early diagnosis and a later diagnosis, which is why I very much welcome the use of AI in early diagnosis. One positive by-product of having a long-standing national health service is that we have in the UK a very large database of historical tissue samples. Will the Minister consider using AI to do a retrospective analysis of those historical tissue samples to try to spot patterns that could inform future speedy diagnosis across a whole range of cancers?

**Andrew Gwynne:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that suggestion and will ask my officials to look into it. I am very keen that we maximise the latest advances in technology, genomics, life sciences and research to ensure that we identify people who are at risk of cancer, preferably before they develop cancer, so that we can get them on appropriate treatments where necessary and they avoid the pain and misery that cancer can bring.

**Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): On this World Cancer Day, will my hon. Friend the public health Minister tell me what efforts he is making to raise awareness of the signs and symptoms of ovarian cancer, such as a bloated tummy, lack of appetite or feeling full, tummy pain or needing to pee more often, in order to increase lifesaving early diagnosis?

**Andrew Gwynne:** I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for all the work that she has done on ovarian cancer since becoming an MP. She knows—the rest of the House might not—that I lost my mum to ovarian cancer. I was 19 when my mum died and she was only 50—my age today. She had a late diagnosis. They basically opened her up to perform a hysterectomy and the cancer had spread all the way through her body. They sewed her back up and she died at the end of a hospital ward two days later in pain and agony. Having awareness of those symptoms is so important. My mum was fobbed off by her GP, because she worked in a shop and lifted boxes. She had a bad back and was bloated and so on. The GP said it was down to her work, rather than erring on the side of caution and getting her checked out. We must ensure that women today are heard by GPs and, more importantly, that we err on the side of caution and get people on to treatment.

**Dame Caroline Dinenage** (Gosport) (Con): The Minister is absolutely right to focus on this. I warmly welcome the reinstatement of the children and young people's cancer taskforce. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to my constituent Charlotte Fairall, who was pivotal in the work to bring the taskforce together in the first place. Charlotte's daughter Sophie died of rhabdomyosarcoma when she was just 10 years old. I know the Minister met Charlotte to discuss this issue. Unfortunately, Sophie is not alone—around 500 children and young people die of cancer every year in the UK. It

is the biggest cause of death by illness of children under the age of 14. Sophie had a wish list of things that she wanted to achieve before she died, including cooking with Gordon Ramsay and wearing high-heeled shoes, but she also wanted to meaningfully change the way we detect, treat and care for children with cancer. Does the Minister agree that the taskforce is a great step in that direction?

**Andrew Gwynne:** It absolutely is, and I thank the hon. Lady for agreeing to co-chair the re-formed taskforce. I know that she cares passionately about this issue, and it was lovely to meet Charlotte some time before Christmas.

Cancer is terrible, and cancer affecting children even more so. As the hon. Lady knows, we paused the taskforce because the general election got in the way. We wanted to carry out a real-time stocktake to establish whether we needed all these different taskforces, but, along with Charlotte, she convinced me, and convinced the Secretary of State, that the work of this taskforce will be crucial to informing our national cancer plan, and I wish her all the best in securing the outcomes that both she and I want to see.

**Peter Prinsley** (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that the move from analogue to digital will be key to cancer research, especially in the field of rare cancers such as the brain tumours that we have been hearing about?

**Andrew Gwynne:** I absolutely do. That shift to analogue to digital, and the use of the latest advantages in technology, science and research, will push the boundaries of what is possible when it comes to diagnosing and treating some of the rarer cancers, on which we have made virtually zero progress in recent years. I think that, with the right direction, the right commitment and the right drive, we can really start to make inroads in this area.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): May I invite the Minister, and indeed everyone here, to join us in Room M after these exchanges, when Radiotherapy UK will have a drop-in session with—most important—our patron Bryan Robson, England's Captain Fantastic? I thank him for mentioning radiotherapy in his statement, which is crucial step forward, but may I suggest that he and the Government need to show exponentially greater ambition to get this right? The UK spends 5% of its cancer budget on radiotherapy, while the OECD average is 9%, which is why the UK is at the bottom of the survival league for so many cancers. Will the Minister commit himself to putting that right?

**Andrew Gwynne:** I am not sure that I will be able to attend the hon. Gentleman's meeting, but I will certainly be in Westminster Hall for his debate later this afternoon. I understand exactly the concerns of people who are championing the need for increased access to radiotherapy treatments. My dad benefited from radiotherapy at the Christie, which probably gave him an extra couple of years of life with his family—I will be forever grateful for that. I get it; I understand it; we need to make the case.

**Imran Hussain** (Bradford East) (Ind): I thank the Minister for his welcome statement, and join him in thanking all the organisations that do the vital work of

helping and supporting those with cancer and their families. He is right to talk about health inequalities, which, as he will know, continue to worsen in constituencies such as mine, where, on average, people live 10 years less than others in more affluent areas; and last year more than 13,000 were waiting for diagnostic tests. Will he join me in commending the work of Eccleshill community diagnostic centre in Bradford—essential, and the first of its kind—which is speeding up the detection of life-threatening conditions such as cancer, and will he assure me that, as part of his national action plan, more support will be given to places such as Bradford and the Eccleshill community diagnostic centre, so that no one is left behind when it comes to their treatment?

**Andrew Gwynne:** As my hon. Friend says, tackling health inequalities is a key priority for this Government, in relation to our health mission but also more generally, when it comes to some of the big conditions such as cancer. In areas such as his and mine, the prevalence of cancer is greater, because of the industrial legacy, and also because the prevalence of smoking is still much higher than the national average. I commend the work of his local diagnostics team, and we need much more of that best practice to be spread across the areas that need it the most.

**Martin Vickers** (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): I welcome the Minister's statement. He will be aware that a routine prostate cancer screening programme would save many lives. Can he give any indication of when it will be introduced?

**Andrew Gwynne:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that question, and also for the written parliamentary questions about prostate cancer that he and a number of other Members have tabled. According to the current guidance, screening for prostate cancer is not recommended in the UK because of the inaccuracy of the current best test for prostate-specific antigen. Indeed, it could actually harm men, as some might be diagnosed with a cancer that would not have caused them problems during their lives. However, I am looking at this carefully, and I know that further information has gone to the National Institute for Health and Care Research so that it can, perhaps, reach a different conclusion. Obviously, as technology and other mechanisms advance, this may well be an area where we can make inroads, but I am happy to work with the hon. Gentleman to ensure that every opportunity is met.

**Josh Fenton-Glynn** (Calder Valley) (Lab): I welcome this plan. I note that it was a recommendation from the Health and Social Care Committee in the last Parliament, and, as a member of that Committee, I hope that it sets a precedent.

Two weeks ago I lost my brother, Alex English, to high-grade acinic cell carcinoma. While I pay tribute to all those who gave him care, can the Minister confirm that we will look at rare cancers and make sure that we research some of them and find treatments?

**Andrew Gwynne:** First, may I send my condolences to my hon. Friend and his family on the loss of his brother Alex?

Of course rarer cancers are important, and they are a crucial part of what will be in the national cancer plan. It is in these areas that we must focus our efforts on diagnosis, treatment and, more importantly, getting the research done, so that we can find ways of tackling some of the very rare but deadly cancers that affect many families, including my hon. Friend's.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): In 2013, the number of breast cancer cases in women under 50 topped 10,000 for the first time, but routine breast cancer screenings are given only to women aged 40 and over. Will the Department review that and ensure that, when appropriate, initial appointments can be given to younger women? While I am at it, although the Minister might not have time to attend, may I invite everyone else to swing by my drop-in event this afternoon to discuss local health inequalities in breast cancer?

**Andrew Gwynne:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for the work that she does in this regard. The decisions on whom to screen are made by the UK national screening committee and their advice comes to Ministers, but I am aware of the case that she has made. Screening women earlier for breast cancer should perhaps be looked at, and I will ensure that my officials look into whether we can make some progress on that for her.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Order. I know that some of these contributions are quite emotional, and if people need to leave the Chamber after they have spoken, that is okay by me.

**Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): Ethan was just 15 and studying for his GCSEs when he was diagnosed with a brain tumour. Sadly, he passed away two years later. I had the privilege of meeting his mum, Nikki, this weekend at two events organised to raise money for brain tumour research. In Ethan's memory, will the Minister commit himself to improving outcomes for people with brain tumours through the national cancer plan?

**Andrew Gwynne:** Through my hon. Friend, I would like to pass my condolences on to Nikki for the loss of Ethan. As I have said, we have not made anything like the progress we would want to make on treatment and survival rates for brain tumours. That will form an integral part of our national cancer plan, and we will utilise all the latest advances in technology and science to try to get the better outcomes that we so desperately want.

**Greg Smith** (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): I genuinely welcome the Minister's commitment to the upgrading of radiotherapy machines, but I share the concerns of the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on radiotherapy, the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), about the scale of the ambition. In defeating this horrible disease, technology and innovation is our friend. What is the Minister's ambition for minimally invasive cancer therapies in the national cancer plan? These technologies are coming along every day, but awareness of them and the ability to get them rolled out on the frontline is slapdash at best. Will he commit to looking at those emerging therapies and getting them rolled out as soon as possible?



**Andrew Gwynne:** Absolutely. Things are advancing so quickly in technology and innovation. It is quite remarkable that science fiction is becoming science fact. We are obviously interested in minimally invasive therapies, and they will form part of the plan. That is why we are consulting. That is the purpose of this exercise: so that we can look at what technologies are here today, what the emerging technologies are and how they will shift the dial on some cancers.

**Adam Jogee** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): The House will know that my family, like many others in Newcastle-under-Lyme, has been impacted by cancer in recent times, so I thank the Minister for his statement and his personal commitment to getting this right. On World Cancer Day, I join him in paying tribute to the charities he mentioned in his statement, and particularly my constituents Mary and Colin, who raise so much money every year for Macmillan. Health inequalities in some of our poorest communities and our ethnic minority communities play a big role in cancer being diagnosed. Can the Minister tell me and my constituents in Newcastle-under-Lyme how we will tackle those health inequalities alongside this national cancer plan?

**Andrew Gwynne:** My hon. Friend makes a very good point, and it relates to not just cancer but a whole range of conditions, including cardiovascular disease, strokes and so many others—it is the same areas that have the worst outcomes, because there are endemic health inequalities that we have not shifted the dial on for decades. Life expectancy is much lower, and healthy life expectancy is much worse, than in less deprived areas. It is part of our health mission to drive forward better health outcomes for people living in the poorest areas, and our national cancer plan will be a key part of that.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): In his remarks yesterday, the Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms, the hon. Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant), implied that he was discussing the future with AstraZeneca, which has had some bad news this week. AstraZeneca makes immunotherapies, among other things, and therefore is very important in allowing people to live better for longer. What discussion will the Minister be having as part of his plan with the pharmaceutical sector, since plainly the national health service cannot do this alone?

**Andrew Gwynne:** The right hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. I have certainly had a number of roundtables with the pharmaceutical sector in the UK about how we can support it, how we can grow our life sciences sector and how Britain can be at the cutting edge of new treatments and clinical trials. Indeed, we had a Delegated Legislation Committee yesterday on regulations to make it easier to carry out clinical trials in this country. Some of the latest advances in pharma are quite remarkable; I think particularly of the work being done on mRNA technology to look at having specific cancer treatments pertinent to a person's genomics—it could be a game changer.

**Sarah Smith** (Hyndburn) (Lab): Hyndburn is home to the incredible woman Lorraine Hargreaves. She established the charity Milly's Smiles after her daughter Milly died of leukaemia, and each year she supports

thousands of families whose children have cancer. Can the Minister reassure her that this plan will also improve outcomes for children? I know that Lorraine will welcome the announcement on the re-establishment of the taskforce, but would the Minister consider meeting her to discuss the lack of support and grief groups for families who go through the unimaginable tragedy of losing a child to cancer?

**Andrew Gwynne:** I cannot even begin to think what it would be like to lose a child full stop, but to lose them to cancer would be horrific for their parents. I pay tribute to Lorraine for all the campaigning she has done on this. I am more than happy to meet my hon. Friend and Lorraine to talk about this, but the whole reason for putting the taskforce back on an operational footing is so that we can make the changes that she and Lorraine want to see.

**Freddie van Mierlo** (Henley and Thame) (LD): Members across the House will be all too familiar with constituents reaching out to let them know that safe, effective new medicines are not approved by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. The Minister speaks of research and the need for access. Will he commit to being a critical friend of NICE, to ensure both good value for the taxpayer and good access for patients?

**Andrew Gwynne:** The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. NICE is there for a particular reason: to ensure that the drugs being developed are available on the NHS when they meet the required threshold. Of course, we want to ensure that as new treatments become available, they are available for British patients. The work that is being done with Moderna and other pharmaceutical companies will ensure that British patients have access to some of the latest treatments as they come through the pipeline.

**Katrina Murray** (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): One of my earliest memories is being in a hospital room as my grandfather was dying of cancer. Ten days ago, I was in the same hospital as my father died with the same cancer—50 years in between, almost to the week, but no significant change in prognosis. Can the Minister assure me that what are termed the less survivable cancers, which are not necessarily rare cancers, are included as part of this work?

**Andrew Gwynne:** My heart goes out to my hon. Friend. I lost both my parents to cancer, and it does not matter when it happens in your life; it is just heartbreaking. As the children of those parents, you never get over it. Of course, we will have a concerted effort on less survivable cancers. In part, they are less survivable because the research has not been done, or not to the extent that we can develop better treatments for them. That is where we really have to shift the dial in the next decade. We have to make sure that people who have a cancer diagnosis have the best opportunities to live a long and fulfilling life after cancer.

**Paul Holmes** (Hamble Valley) (Con): I declare an interest, in that I have now been smoke-free for 34 days using the NHS Quit Smoking app, even though my waistline and the Government have tested my resolve in recent weeks.



Eighteen months ago we lost my office manager, Susan Hall, to lymphoma. The Minister will know that parliamentary employees are not just employees; they are part of our family. Part of her treatment was community care provided by an excellent hospice in my constituency called Mountbatten hospice. This is not meant to be a political point, but what progress has been made on looking at a fairer, Government-led mechanism to fund our hospices across the United Kingdom on an even footing and with more money?

**Andrew Gwynne:** I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on being smoke-free. Hopefully, he is the first of many as we move towards a smoke-free UK by 2030. He makes a real and serious point about not just community care—one of the big shifts in the health mission is from hospital to community—but how we approach the hospice sector. Last weekend I was at my local hospice, Willow Wood in Ashton-under-Lyne, where staff made exactly the same point. That will be fed into the national cancer plan.

**Rachel Taylor** (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement, and particularly for his deep understanding of women's health issues and the difficulty that many women face in getting their GP to understand what they are going through. The Women and Equalities Committee has spent some time looking at that this year.

The George Eliot hospital in my constituency serves many of my constituents, who often complain about the length of time it takes to get scan results. Between June 2023 and 2024, almost 12% of people waited more than 28 days to receive MRI results, compared with 6.5% nationally. I know that the team there are working very hard to bring the time down, but can the Minister reassure my constituents that the use of AI will speed up the time it takes for them to get their scan results and the treatment they need?

**Andrew Gwynne:** My hon. Friend makes some really important points. The need to get people scanned more quickly, and to get results to consultants, is in part why we now have extra capacity through community diagnostic centres, where there are extra facilities for scans. She is absolutely right to raise the issue of where AI and emerging technologies may take us, which will almost certainly lead to faster identification of cancers.

**Robin Swann** (South Antrim) (UUP): I thank the Minister for making his statement on World Cancer Day, and I do not doubt his sincerity on this issue. On 22 March 2022, the then Northern Ireland Health Minister launched a 10-year cancer strategy and funding plan. It was co-designed, co-produced and co-chaired by Professor Charlotte McArdle, the then chief nursing officer, and Ivan McMinn, the then chair of Cancer Focus NI. The strategy looked to adopt a regional approach, to create smoother pathways and to adopt successful innovations. It had 58 action points and was costed at £145 million per year for 10 years, but it has not really made any progress since the fall of the Northern Ireland Executive. The Minister has said that he is developing a national cancer plan. Will he meet me and the current Northern Ireland Health Minister to ensure that the work that was developed is not lost but is built into what can be a truly successful national cancer plan if we do it right?

**Andrew Gwynne:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for the work that he did in this area in a previous guise. I am more than happy to meet him and Mike Nesbitt, with whom I had a meeting on drug strategy and drugs as a public health issue before this statement, to drive forward how we can improve outcomes in Northern Ireland and get that plan working again, as it should never have stalled.

**Shaun Davies** (Telford) (Lab): People talk about the politics of hope and, goodness me, this statement can give the country some hope that cancer survival rates will be driven up. However, the Shrewsbury and Telford hospital NHS trust has remained challenged over the last 14 years. Will my hon. Friend the Minister confirm that the areas that are most challenged will be given support to catch up and push on?

**Andrew Gwynne:** My hon. Friend makes a really important point, which is not lost on those of us on the Government Front Bench. There are real challenges across the healthcare system, and some of the areas with some of the worst outcomes also happen to have some of the worst health inequalities. Those issues are exacerbated by the pressure on the healthcare system. He can have my reassurance that the Government will make it a priority to drive down health inequalities and ensure that healthcare systems get the support they need.

**Vikki Slade** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I hope the Minister will join me in thanking the team at Dorset cancer centre in Poole, who enabled my step-mum, Sally Walls, to ring the bell this morning following the end of her radiotherapy treatment. Her treatment has been exceptional and swift, but the situation is inconsistent. Nikki from Horton was told that she needed a two-week appointment for gynaecological problems. When she called, she was told that it would be six weeks. She could not bear to wait, so she borrowed £650 to find out that she was all clear. Can the Minister offer reassurance that he will end the postcode lottery?

**Andrew Gwynne:** I congratulate the hon. Lady's step-mum on ringing that bell, which is great news. The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise the issue of inconsistency when it comes to the levels of service that different patients get. That will obviously be a major factor in the national cancer plan going forward, to ensure that all people diagnosed with cancer have the same levels of treatment and the same opportunities to survive.

**Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Minister's statement. He will know as well as anybody else in this Chamber that smoking causes one in four cancers in this country, and that two out of three people who smoke will die as a result. He is assiduously moving the Tobacco and Vapes Bill through Parliament. Can he set out the likely effect that the Bill will have on those shocking statistics?

**Andrew Gwynne:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for being a member of the Committee for that Bill, which ended its business last Thursday. The hon. Members for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), and for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford), who are sitting on the Opposition Front Bench, were also members of that Committee. My hon. Friend is absolutely right,

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because the Bill will stop the conveyor belt that the tobacco industry has used to its advantage for decades. We are saying that we will not allow any more children and young people to become addicted to nicotine and tobacco, which, as he says, kills two out of every three users. It is uniquely the most harmful product, and we are making the next generation smoke-free for a reason.

**Claire Young** (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): One of my constituents waited two years from the onset of severe symptoms to receive a cancer diagnosis, and another 10 weeks to have the type of cancer identified, at which point it was incurable. One of the key failings in this case seems to be the disconnect between her reporting the symptoms to her GP and getting the right referral to the hospital, despite her having a previous history of breast cancer. What promises can the Minister make on improving the co-ordination between different parts of the NHS to make sure that people like my constituent do not fall through the cracks in the future?

**Andrew Gwynne:** That kind of experience is unacceptable, and the purpose of our plan is to demand better of the NHS and the system more widely when it comes to cancer outcomes. Nobody should have the kind of experience that the hon. Lady's constituent had, which is why we will drive better outcomes through better treatment and earlier diagnosis, and make sure that the whole NHS is joined up in the process—a key part of the national cancer plan.

**Douglas McAllister** (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): Given that today is World Cancer Day, this statement is extremely welcome. Half of all leukaemia patients will not survive beyond five years, and the outlook is even bleaker for those diagnosed with acute myeloid leukaemia. If no action is taken, 80% of those diagnosed with AML today will not survive this Parliament. Early diagnosis and greater research are key to improving people's chances. Will the Minister consider introducing measures to ensure that they are included in the national cancer plan?

**Andrew Gwynne:** My hon. Friend has my assurance on all fronts there. Early diagnosis, more and better research, and identifying how we improve outcomes for people with a variety of cancers are all crucial. His points about leukaemia are well rehearsed in the Department and will be a key part of the national cancer plan.

**Mr Joshua Reynolds** (Maidenhead) (LD): Some 3.4 million people in England live further than 45 minutes away from a radiotherapy centre. We all want to see that changed, but one of the challenges will be the fact that eight out of 10 radiotherapists have considered leaving the profession. Could the Minister outline what work the Government are doing to retain and recruit the radiotherapists that we need?

**Andrew Gwynne:** The hon. Member makes a reasonable point, and part of the reason that we are having a refreshed workforce plan alongside the 10-year NHS plan is precisely to address some of the concerns that he has raised. We need to make sure that we have the right

workforce in the right place, and to future-proof it for the kinds of treatments that will come on stream in the coming decade.

**Dr Scott Arthur** (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and also for the time he has spent with me discussing my private Member's Bill, the Rare Cancers Bill. Yesterday, I met representatives of the Brain Tumour Charity, Brain Tumour Research and Pancreatic Cancer UK, and we did in part discuss the national cancer plan. I do not speak on those charities' behalf, but one of the conclusions I drew from the discussion was that there is a real need to have the voices of rare cancer patients and survivors at the heart of this consultation. Does the Minister agree with that point? Secondly, on World Cancer Day, will he join me in wishing my daughter Ruth good luck as she trains to run a marathon in aid of the Brain Tumour Charity?

**Andrew Gwynne:** Good luck, Ruth! I hope she succeeds and raises lots of money for such a good cause. I want to thank my hon. Friend as well for his crucial work in this area. He has my assurances that at the heart of the first step, which is the call for evidence I have announced today, and of the development of the national cancer plan, those with lived experience—patients or loved ones of people who have had cancer and those who have either survived or are now bereaved—absolutely have to be at the heart of what we are doing. We will take their views, their opinions and their thoughts fully on board as we develop this plan.

**Max Wilkinson** (Cheltenham) (LD): I lost my father to lymphoma and my wife is an ovarian cancer survivor, so I warmly welcome this statement. In Gloucestershire, we are a designated regional cancer centre, but unfortunately the buildings at Cheltenham general are just not up to scratch any more. Fundraising was mentioned earlier by the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh), and we are in that situation. We need £17.5 million and we have £9 million to go. Will the Minister warmly congratulate the Big Space Cancer Appeal fundraisers, particularly Dr Charles Candish and Dr Sam Guglani, who are leading the charge on that? Would he like to meet those consultants to discuss how we might move this fundraising effort along so that the whole project does not rest on the back of charity?

**Andrew Gwynne:** I am more than happy to meet the hon. Member and the team to look at precisely those points and I wish them all the very best in their fundraising efforts, but look, as a country we are better than this. I want to see the national cancer plan really start to address how we can get that research, that treatment, those diagnoses and those better outcomes for people with the NHS at the heart of it, doing what the NHS does best and ensuring that we get those outcomes from publicly funded improvements.

**Sojan Joseph** (Ashford) (Lab): I welcome all the efforts this Government are making to improve cancer services. Early diagnosis is just as important as prevention, but we all know that patients are currently waiting several months for scan procedures. A recent visit to the GP surgeries in my constituency showed that they have spare capacity for scanning, but it is not actively offered to patients at the moment. This is due to a lack of collaborative working and communication in the health

system, so will the Minister tell the House how we can improve the existing systems so that they work effectively and people can get timely procedures?

**Andrew Gwynne:** Part of our recovery plan is to ensure that we return the national health service to constitutional standards, not just in respect of cancer but across the board. We inherited a broken national health service and it is incumbent on this Government to fix it and make it fit for the future. Clearly, in areas such as my hon. Friend's, the NHS needs to be doing much better when it comes to cancer outcomes and cancer treatments, and this plan and this Government will ensure that his local system gets all the support it needs.

**Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD):** I declare an interest, as I have a family member who has shares in a medical company.

I pay tribute to the Minister for following through with his promise for a national cancer plan. It is clearly very important to him, and it is to me as well. Shaun Walsh of Cancer Research UK first raised with me the need for a dedicated cancer plan, and it has been an important part of my work in Parliament since then. Will the Minister meet me and Shaun to discuss the next steps for the national cancer plan?

**Andrew Gwynne:** I am more than happy to do so. My diary secretary, who will be watching this from the Department of Health, is probably having kittens at the amount of meetings. I meet Shaun and the cancer charities frequently anyway, and as I said at the start of the statement, I commend the work that they do in this area. This national cancer plan is important to me, to the Secretary of State, to the Prime Minister and to the sector, and that is why we are doing the right thing and having a plan.

**Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab):** I welcome today's statement and I know that my wife, Julia, who is a consultant radiographer in mammography at King's Mill hospital, will also welcome it. One of my earliest childhood memories is of watching my grandfather, William Yemm, die of lung cancer. William was a lifelong coalminer at Blidworth colliery. I think he drank and smoked rather more than was good for him throughout his life, so does the Minister agree that prevention is every bit as important as diagnosis, treatment and research in the fight against cancer? Can he reassure me that this welcome national cancer plan will consider what action we can take to prevent people from developing cancer?

**Andrew Gwynne:** My hon. Friend raises such an important point. This Government have three shifts and I have mentioned two of them already: the shifts from hospital to community and from analogue to digital. The third shift is from sickness to prevention. We absolutely have to shift the dial, whether it is on alcohol harms, smoking, obesity, inactivity or the air we breathe. These are the five-point plan priorities when it comes to prevention. My hon. Friend is so right to focus on this, and we hope to cut the instances of a whole range of preventable illnesses, including cancer.

**David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD):** Many of my constituents have to travel to England to access cancer treatment. This presents many problems, one of which is a lack of data sharing between NHS England and NHS Wales. Will the Minister assure Welsh patients that if they are treated in an English hospital, their data will follow them home and that it will be accessible to NHS Wales?

**Andrew Gwynne:** The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. I also have regular meetings with ministerial colleagues in the Welsh Government, and this is an area of interest to both Governments. We need to make sure there is better sharing of data and information for patients from Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland when accessing NHS services in England, so that there is joined-up, smarter use of the data held on patients by our respective NHS systems in order to get better outcomes. I assure the hon. Gentleman that I am already taking this up with ministerial colleagues across the devolved Administrations.

**Paul Davies (Colne Valley) (Lab):** I thank the Minister for his statement. Since my election, I have met a wide range of cancer charities, especially those representing rare and less common cancers. As the Minister knows, 55% of UK cancer deaths are a result of those types of cancers, such as blood, ovarian and kidney cancers. Will he ensure that rare and less common cancers are not forgotten in the national cancer plan?

**Andrew Gwynne:** My hon. Friend has my full assurance that all cancers—all tumour types—will be an integral part of the national cancer plan. On rarer cancers, it is important that we use the call for evidence and the discussions we will have in the coming weeks and months to ensure that those voices are heard as we drive forward our plan.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I thank the Minister for his statement. His words always display the compassion and comfort that these types of statements should convey.

Does the Minister agree that it is time for the Government to do more to fund cancer research, rather than leaving charities to bear the burden? Cancer Research UK alone has invested more than £4 billion in research over the last 10 years. Will this plan ensure that groundbreaking research, such as that carried out at Queen's University Belfast, will have enhanced funding for a world-class breakthrough in finding a cure for cancer? Will Northern Ireland be one of the UK's 30 testing sites for women?

**Andrew Gwynne:** I thank my hon. Friend. I always call him my hon. Friend because I see more of him than I see of my wife. *[Laughter.]* Usually because we are in the same debates.

The hon. Member makes an important point about research, which will be a crucial aspect of the national cancer plan. Advances in technology, science and pharmaceuticals do not happen by accident; they happen because we fund the research to get to that point. We need to do much better in researching some of the rarer and less survivable cancers. Those scientists and charities must have access to the funds that are available so they can carry out the research we need.



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As for where the 30 sites will be, that is above my pay grade. There are criteria, but I will take it back to my officials and see what we can do.

**Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his statement, and I thank every Member on both sides of the Chamber who has shared their personal stories.

I was nine years old when I lost my grandmother, Grace, to cancer. That was a long time ago, but it still has a profound effect on me. Does the Minister agree that early detection is vital for survival rates? In particular, I emphasise the point about the importance of ensuring that women are taken seriously when they visit their GP.

I thank my constituent Sir Rod Stewart for the support he gave to the radiography department at Princess Alexandra hospital. Does the Minister agree that this national cancer plan will mean that we do not have to rely on the good will of rock legends such as Rod Stewart to support everyone in our society?

**Andrew Gwynne:** Talk about name-dropping; if only I had such famous constituents. Burnage was once home to the Gallagher brothers, and Denton was home to Mick Hucknall—I do not think any of them live there any more.

My hon. Friend makes an important point that women, in particular, have to be taken seriously by their GPs. The symptoms of some of these cancers could indicate a multitude of different things but, knowing from my mum's bitter experience, I would sooner that GPs erred on the side of caution and got people diagnosed. If the diagnosis turns out not to be cancer, what a wonderful result that is. If it is cancer, we can get them on the treatment pathway sooner rather than later.

**Mr Bayo Alaba** (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): I also commend the Minister for his great announcement, which is welcome and needed.

The Minister has often spoken about the importance of shifting from sickness to prevention, from hospital to community, and from analogue to digital. Residents of Southend East and Rochford deserve an NHS that is there when they need it. What impact does he think the plan will have on the issues he has outlined today?

**Andrew Gwynne:** My hon. Friend raises an important point, and it is a good one on which to end. Each of those three shifts—from hospital to community, from analogue to digital, and from sickness to prevention—could be taken in isolation. However, by putting them together, we can shift how we deliver health and care in this country. We will make it fit for purpose, we will drive up standards across the system, we will get the NHS back to constitutional standards—which means lower waiting times, shorter waiting lists and better outcomes—and, when it comes to cancer, we will save lives. It is as simple as that.

## BILL PRESENTED

STATUTORY ADOPTION PAY (REPORT ON EXTENSION TO THE SELF-EMPLOYED) BILL

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

Lisa Smart presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to report to Parliament on the merits of extending eligibility for statutory adoption pay to persons who are self-employed or contractors; and for connected purposes.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 7 March, and to be printed (Bill 175).*



## Road Traffic (Unlicensed Drivers)

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

1.57 pm

**Will Stone** (Swindon North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to provide that an unlicensed driver who has never held a valid driving licence and who causes the death of another person by driving commits the offence of careless driving under section 3 of the Road Traffic Act 1988; and for connected purposes.

I thank Members for being present as I introduce the Harry Parker Bill. Before I speak to the aim of the Bill, I will give some context. This is not just a policy matter; it is about justice, accountability and preventing future tragedies.

Who was Harry? What happened to him? And how can we change the law to prevent anyone from going through what his parents Adam and Kelly, who are sitting in the Gallery, have gone through? Harry was a 14-year-old boy. He loved football, taking home a trophy or two in his time. Those who knew him said he was a very popular and charming young man. To his parents, he was their world. Adam says:

“He had the biggest heart and loved to make people laugh. He could light up the room with just his presence.”

However, on 25 November 2022, the unspeakable happened—an event that truly rocked our community. Harry was struck by a car outside his school, which sadly resulted in his death. This, in itself, is a tragedy. Harry was a young, 14-year-old boy with his whole life ahead of him. I ask the House to join me in expressing our deepest condolences to the family, and to recognise them and their remarkable strength in facing this unimaginable loss.

Losing Harry was tragic enough, but what followed made it even worse. The person who struck Harry was driving without a licence and without insurance and failed to stop at the scene. Given the circumstances, one might assume that justice would be served and that the individual would face serious criminal charges, yet in November 2024, all charges were dropped.

Let me be absolutely clear: this is not an attack on the Crown Prosecution Service or the police. They followed the law as it stands, but that is precisely the problem. The law in its current form is failing. We must ask ourselves how it can be that a person can drive illegally and take a life, yet face no legal consequences. How can it be that knowingly operating a vehicle without a licence is not automatically deemed careless or dangerous driving? The answer is simple: our system is flawed.

A person who does not hold a valid licence has no business being behind the wheel of a car, and when they are, they put lives at risk.

I cannot bring Harry back, nor can I give Adam and Kelly the justice they deserve. No legislation, no speech and no court ruling will ever ease their pain. What we can do—what we must do—is ensure that no other family has to endure what they have been through. The Harry Parker Bill seeks to close the dangerous gaps in our legal system and impose real-world consequences on those who choose to drive without a licence; under the Bill, those who drive without a valid licence are deemed careless. I urge the House to join me in honouring Harry’s memory not just with words, but with action. Let us commit to making our roads safer for all. I urge the Government to consider this Bill in their road safety strategy.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Ordered,*

That Will Stone, Mr Bayo Alaba, Dan Aldridge, Alex McIntyre, Luke Myer, Chris Vince, Alex Ballinger, Tom Hayes, Henry Tufnell, Dr Roz Savage, Deidre Costigan and

Frank McNally present the Bill.

Will Stone accordingly presented the Bill.

*Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 13 June, and to be printed (Bill 174).*

## BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

*Ordered,*

That, at this day’s sitting, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 16 (Proceedings under an Act or on European Union documents), the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on—

(a) the Motions (i) in the name of Sir Stephen Timms relating to the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2025, and (ii) in the name of Torsten Bell relating to the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2025, not later than three hours after the start of proceedings on the Motion for this Order; and

(b) the Motions (i) in the name of James Murray relating to the draft Social Security (Contributions) (Rates, Limits and Thresholds Amendments, National Insurance Funds Payments and Extension of Veteran’s Relief) Regulations 2025, and (ii) in the name of Darren Jones relating to the draft Child Benefit and Guardian’s Allowance Up-rating Order 2025, not later than three hours after the start of proceedings on the first such Motion;

proceedings may continue, though opposed, until any hour, and may be entered upon after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—  
(*Keir Mather.*)

## Social Security Benefits

2.3 pm

**The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms):** I beg to move,

That the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2025, which was laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.

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

That the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2025, which was laid before this House on 16 January, be approved.

**Sir Stephen Timms:** In my view, the instruments are compatible with the European convention on human rights.

The draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2025 will increase relevant state pension rates by 4.1%, in line with the growth in average earnings in the year to May 2024. It will increase most other benefit rates by 1.7%, in line with the rise in the consumer prices index in the year to September 2024. The Government's commitment to the triple lock means that the basic and full rate of the new state pension will be uprated by whichever is highest out of the growth in earnings, the growth in prices, or 2.5%. That will mean 4.1% for 2025-26. From April this year, the basic state pension will increase from £169.50 per week to £176.45, and the full rate of the new state pension will increase from £221.20 to £230.25.

We are fully committed to maintaining the pension triple lock. There is some confusion about the position of the Conservative party, and I hope that the shadow Minister will clarify the position when he speaks.

**Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con):** On clarification, can the Minister clarify for how much longer the state pension will be taxed? The Conservative Government stood for election on a commitment to the triple lock plus. We lost the election, but we were going to take out that fiscal drag. Can the Minister explain how long that tax will stay in place?

**Sir Stephen Timms:** My understanding, from what the Leader of the Opposition has said, is that the Conservative party is no longer committed to the triple lock, let alone the triple lock plus. I can tell the hon. Member that we do not have any plans to do what he suggests.

**Dr Evans:** I believe that under the Budget, the Government are not looking to review the position until 2028, so those on the state pension have to submit a tax return, because the state pension is being taxed.

**Dan Tomlinson (Chipping Barnet) (Lab):** It was what you did.

**Dr Evans:** Agreed. That was brought in by a previous Government, and we in the Conservative party campaigned to remove it. Can the Minister confirm that the situation will remain in place until 2028?

**Sir Stephen Timms:** I simply point out to the hon. Gentleman that his party appears to no longer be committed to the triple lock. We look forward to clarification on that point from the shadow Minister.

Other components of state pension awards, such as those previously built up under earnings-related state pension schemes, including the additional state pension, will increase by 1.7% in line with prices. The Government are committed to supporting pensioners on the lowest incomes, so the safety net provided by the pension credit standard minimum guarantee will increase by 4.1%. For single pensioners, that means an increase from £218.15 to £227.10 per week; for couples, the increase is from £332.95 to £346.60 per week. We want everybody entitled to that support to receive it, which is why we launched the national pension credit campaign. We received around 150,000 pension credit applications in the 16 weeks after the winter fuel payment announcement.

**Dr Evans:** Will the Minister give way?

**Sir Stephen Timms:** I will give way one more time to the hon. Gentleman.

**Dr Evans:** I am very grateful. We do indeed want more people to take up pension credit. However, one of the biggest problems is the processing time. The response to a written question that I tabled before Christmas showed that there was a 75% success rate in getting that done within 50 days, which means that that did not happen for one in four. I later re-tabled the same question, and it turned out that the standard had got worse. What work are the Government doing to make sure that applications are processed within 50 days? Especially when it is cold and people have had their winter fuel payment taken away, it is important that those who need that support get it as soon as they can.

**Sir Stephen Timms:** The hon. Gentleman is quite right; it is important that applications are processed speedily, and I am pleased with the number of applications. I can confirm—I think he knows this—that everybody who applied before 21 December will receive, if they are successful, their winter fuel payment. We have also moved extra staff on to pension credit processing. However, the hon. Gentleman is quite right to raise that point.

Universal credit and the legacy means-tested benefits that it replaces provide support for people of working age. We have committed in our manifesto to reviewing universal credit, so that it makes work pay and tackles poverty, and we will set out shortly how we plan to fulfil that commitment. For those below state pension age, the order increases the personal and standard allowances of working-age benefits, including universal credit, by 1.7%, in line with the increase in prices in the year to September 2024. In the Budget last November, the Chancellor announced that the maximum repayment deduction from universal credit payments will be reduced from April, from 25% of the universal credit standard allowance to 15%—the fair repayment rate—and 1.2 million households are expected to benefit from that change by an average of £420 per year.

In addition, the order increases statutory payments by 1.7%. That includes statutory maternity pay, statutory paternity pay, statutory shared parental pay and statutory sick pay. Benefits for those who have additional costs as a result of disability or health impairments will also increase by 1.7%. That includes disability living allowance, attendance allowance and personal independence payment. The order will also increase carer's allowance by 1.7%. The Chancellor announced in the Budget that, from April, the weekly carer's allowance earnings threshold will be

pegged to the level of 16 hours' work at the national living wage. That means that, from April, unpaid carers will be able to earn up to £196 per week net earnings and still receive carer's allowance, compared with £151 now. I am pleased to say that that move has been very widely welcomed, and we expect it to bring an additional 60,000 unpaid carers into eligibility for the benefit, and, crucially, to reduce the likelihood that carers who manage to combine some work with their caring responsibilities will inadvertently fall foul of the earnings limit, because, in future, that threshold will keep up with changes in the national living wage.

On disability and carer's benefits, we will continue to ensure that carers, and people who face additional costs because of disability or health impairment, get the support that they need, and we will set out proposals for reform of health and disability benefits in a Green Paper in the spring.

**John Milne (Horsham) (LD):** In my constituency of Horsham, food bank usage increased by 25% last year, and it has increased by 700% over six years. In the light of that evidence of the pressures, will the Government consider putting a minimum level on universal credit?

**Sir Stephen Timms:** I have seen representations along those lines. It is not something that we are considering at the moment, but we are, as I have mentioned, committed to reviewing universal credit, and we will do so over the course of this year. I imagine that we will be looking at a very wide variety of representations, and the hon. Gentleman and others will be very welcome to make submissions to us along those lines. Lastly, let me say a word about the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2025.

**Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind):** Before the Minister gets on to the pension issue, may I just say that the order requires the Secretary of State to examine the effects of benefit uprating and the effects of the existing payment of benefits? What studies has he done on the effect of the two-child benefit cap? Secondly, last week we passed a welfare spending cap—a cap that, obviously, could be breached in the future. Will the Government revisit the whole idea of the welfare cap, with a view to abolishing it, so that we ensure that the motive force in deciding on benefits is the level of need, rather than an arbitrary figure decided by the Treasury?

**Sir Stephen Timms:** On the two-child limit, as the right hon. Member knows, we very quickly set up after the general election the child poverty taskforce, which is looking in a very ambitious way at the whole range of levers that the Government have at their disposal for tackling the problem of child poverty. We would very much like to repeat the success of the last Labour Government in reducing child poverty so dramatically in when in office. I say that with particularly strong feeling, having taken the Child Poverty Act 2010 through the House towards the end of that Government's term. Under consideration certainly will be social security changes—we will look at what changes might be appropriate. We are not able to say whether the two-child limit will be removed, but all those things will be considered carefully during production of the report, which the taskforce will bring forward.

We are not looking, I do not think, at changing the arrangements around the overall welfare cap. Of course, there is always some confusion between the individual benefit cap and the overall welfare cap. As the right hon. Member said, there was a debate last week on the overall cap. There is certainly scope for debate about that and, indeed, the benefit cap as well, but we are not proposing any changes to those arrangements in the short term.

The draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order sets out the yearly amount by which the GMP part of an individual's contracted-out occupational pension earned between April 1988 and April 1997 must be increased if it is in payment. The increases paid by occupational pension schemes help to provide a measure of inflation protection to people who are in receipt of GMPs earned between those two years. Legislation requires that GMPs earned between those two dates must be increased by the percentage increase in the general level of prices, as measured the previous September, capped at 3%. This year, it means that the order will increase the relevant part of the GMP by the September 2024 consumer prices index figure, which is 1.7%.

The draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order, if Parliament approves it this afternoon, commits the Government to increased expenditure of £6.9 billion in 2025-26. The changes will mainly come into effect from 7 April and will apply for the tax year 2025-26. The order maintains the triple lock, benefiting pensioners who are in receipt of the basic and new state pensions; raises the level of the safety net in pension credit beyond the increase in prices; increases the rate of benefits for people in the labour market; and increases the rate of carer's benefits and support to help with additional costs arising from disability or health impairment.

The draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order requires formerly contracted-out occupational pension schemes to pay an increase of 1.7% on GMPs in payment earned between April 1988 and April 1997, providing people with a measure of protection against inflation, paid for by their scheme. I commend to the House the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2025 and the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2025.

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

2.17 pm

**Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con):** Let me state at the outset that the Opposition support the measures to uprate pensions in line with earnings and benefits in line with inflation. I am honoured, personally, to take part in this important annual ritual, which is never well attended but is always a high-quality debate. The traditional star of this debate is, of course, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), who this year has descended from the clouds of the Work and Pensions Committee to the sweaty arena of ministerial office. No one is more qualified than he to take the office that he now has. No one has more genuine expertise and compassion for the people that we all want to support than he, so I am very pleased that he is in this role. I just note in passing how much the House misses the expertise of departed Members. Paul Maynard, David Linden and Nigel Mills all used to take part in this debate to



[*Danny Kruger*]

great value. I welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), who is taking up his position as a new star of this annual debate.

Despite the formality, it is an important debate, because it is an opportunity for us to take stock of the welfare and pensions system as a whole. As pensions and the triple lock were mentioned, I am happy to provide some clarification for the right hon. Gentleman. I think he has misunderstood, or our leader's position has been misquoted, because we are not looking at cancelling the triple lock. It is his colleague, the new Pensions Minister, who has been very clearly quoted saying that the triple lock is a silly system and indefensible. I look forward to further clarification from Government Members.

**Dan Tomlinson:** As I understand it, the shadow Chancellor said that the triple lock is unsustainable. Do you agree with him on that point?

**Danny Kruger:** Clearly, there are questions about the long-term sustainability of our pensions system and our national insurance fund, but I think the shadow Chancellor was talking about the very long term, rather than the immediate situation that we are in. There is no intention, on the Conservative Benches anyway, to review the triple lock at this stage.

**Sir Stephen Timms:** To clarify the position further, what happened was that the leader of the hon. Gentleman's party was asked on LBC whether she would look at the triple lock, and her reply was,

"we're going to look at means testing. Means testing is something which we don't do properly here."

What did she mean by that?

**Danny Kruger:** My right hon. Friend replied, "No", to the interviewer. We are not looking at means-testing the triple lock. She was talking more generally about the challenge of means-testing in our social security system, which is a legitimate question for us all to consider, as I shall go on to discuss.

I did not want to get too partisan in this debate, but—[*Interruption.*] Here we go! No, I won't, genuinely, because the challenge of our welfare system is a shared problem that we face across the House. I will note in passing that our party's record on welfare is a good one. We introduced universal credit, rationalising the spaghetti web of benefits that we inherited from the right hon. Gentleman when he was last in office. We made work pay and helped people off welfare and into work, and we succeeded in that, with 4 million more people in employment in 2024 than in 2010.

Let me point out that we had another mess to sort out in the public finances. When we took office, the Government were running a deficit of 9% and the Treasury was spending way more than it was earning. By the time the pandemic struck, the deficit was down to less than 1%. We were living within our means and were able to afford the generous uplifts made to benefits and pensions in the last Parliament, as well as the huge package of support that we provided during the pandemic.

I want to be fair and admit that, as the Minister suggested, the welfare system is not working properly at the moment. Too many people are being consigned to a

life of inactivity and dependency, especially via the categories of sickness benefit. It is bad for those people, their communities and the country as a whole, including the taxpayer, who spends £65 billion a year on incapacity and disability benefits, rising to £100 billion a year unless reforms are made by the end of this Parliament.

So what is going on? Those terrible figures reflect the fact that we have bad rates of physical ill health, including obesity and, as is strongly evidenced in the statistics, bad backs because we simply do not move around enough in the day. The figures also reflect a rise in mental ill health, which we see in alarming rates in schools and among young people. We have to do more on those issues through all sorts of interventions that lie more with the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care than with the Department for Work and Pensions. However, as the Lords Economic Affairs Committee reported last week, the rise in welfare claims cannot be attributed to worsening health or longer NHS waiting lists; the problem is growing far faster than that.

Perhaps the problem is low wages that do not attract people into employment, and that is certainly a reality. Low wages have driven demand for the immigration that we have seen get so out of control in recent years. Profound changes are under way in the world of work, away from secure employment towards a more precarious jobs market. Labour is destroying jobs, taxing employment and discouraging new hires with its new Employment Rights Bill. However, the fact is that wages have risen sharply above inflation in recent years, which is why pensions are going up by earnings this year. Employers are offering good wages but are not filling vacancies.

The issue is not health, although we have problems in health; the issue is not work, although we have big problems there—the issue is welfare. People are not being incentivised to take jobs because the offer from the welfare system is better. When I say welfare, I do not mean unemployment support. Thanks to universal credit and the last Government's reforms, we saw record numbers of people move off unemployment benefit and into work. That is because we offered support to people to find work and imposed strict conditions that meant people had to actively look for a job. If they did not, they lost the benefit. That worked for a lot of people, but we found—here is the issue—that for a lot of other people, the incentives made them go the other way, further away from work into the sickness category, because that is where the good money is. In some cases, the money is double what they can get on unemployment benefit, and sometimes £3,000 more than the minimum wage. People almost certainly get it because the approval rates are high at over 90% for the limited capacity for work category.

This is big and unconditional money. There is no expectation to do anything about the health conditions that mean someone is signed off sick. There is no expectation of being reassessed any time soon or, indeed, ever. That is the challenge, and I hope the Government will rise to it in the same way that we rose to the crisis in unemployment benefit in the last decade.

**Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con):** One of the ways the last Government helped to deal with this issue was by dealing with the taper. It was at 63% and it went down to 55%, so people who were

working got more of their own money back. Does my hon. Friend believe that this is one way we could incentivise people to step back into the workplace—by having more of their money as they earn it?

**Danny Kruger:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That was a key part of the reforms brought in towards the last part of the last decade, enabled by universal credit—a much simpler system. I am glad to say that we managed to reduce that taper significantly and to incentivise work.

**Dan Tomlinson:** Madam Deputy Speaker, I will try not to say “you” this time—I am sorry.

I would be genuinely interested to know what the Opposition’s position is on reform of the incapacity benefit system. It is a knotty problem. I know that when Opposition Members were in government, it was considered, but I am not clear what their position is at the moment. I know the Government are coming forward with proposals soon, so I would be genuinely interested to hear.

**Danny Kruger:** I am grateful for the opportunity. We had a whole series of plans that were sadly interrupted by the general election result, and I will come on in a moment to some of the suggestions I have for where the Government might go.

**Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD):** The hon. Gentleman was talking about incentivising people into work. In my surgeries in Torbay, I find that an awful lot of people are off sick with hip problems or mental health challenges, and the challenge people have in getting back into work is the broken health system that was left by the previous Conservative Government. I hope the new Government will drive harder on fixing the system, because many people on benefits are keen to get back into work; they are just unfit for work.

**Danny Kruger:** The hon. Gentleman reflects the experience that many of us have had in our surgeries. Nevertheless, I do not think that health reform on its own will do the job. As I mentioned, the House of Lords Economic Affairs Committee has looked into the matter and reported last week, pointing out that the increase in welfare claims cannot be attributed to longer waiting lists or, indeed, to worsening health conditions. The welfare problem is outstripping the problems we see in the nation’s health, so we have to do more in the DWP. We wait with bated breath to see some movement on that front.

In fact, it was in this debate last year when we were uprating benefits that the hon. Member for Birkenhead (Alison McGovern), now a ministerial colleague of the right hon. Member for East Ham, said that, “Labour has a plan”. That was a year ago. Seven months ago, Labour won the election. She did not say that the plan was oven-ready, but she implied it. I know the Minister says that the delay is because of a court case that happened two weeks ago, but I do not quite understand how that explains the delay that has been going on for seven months.

Here we are approving a measure that will increase expenditure by nearly £7 billion, as the right hon. Gentleman said, and we have no idea how the bill will be brought down over time. But after much head scratching in the DWP—and, we are told, people pulling their hair out in No. 10—we are getting closer to the big reveal.

We hear exciting hints in the media that the Government might scrap the limited capacity for work category altogether, scrap the work capability assessment, merge employment and support allowance into the personal independence payment system, or require people on sickness benefits to engage with work coaches. I am encouraged by all that pitch-rolling.

If the Government are softening up their Back Benchers for serious reform, I applaud them for it, but I will believe it when I see it, because Labour opposed every step towards tougher conditions, more assessments and more incentives to work. They opposed reforms that we were introducing to the fit note system. In fact, I see from a written answer to a question in the other place that the Government say they have no plans to reform the fit note system, which I regret. I wonder whether the Minister could help clarify if that is the case.

On universal credit, it appears that the sinner repenteth, or sort of repenteth. The Government are on some kind of journey. In the last Parliament, they said they would scrap universal credit, then they said they would replace it, and now, as we have heard, they are reviewing it. I am glad to hear that, although the right hon. Gentleman just said that they are reviewing it over the course of this year, so that seems to be unrelated to the Green Paper process, which we are expecting in the spring. I would like to understand how those two processes are aligned.

Rather than scrapping, replacing or reviewing universal credit, I invite the Government simply to use it. It is a flexible system, as we saw during the pandemic, and it works; it just needs to be adapted to the new challenge. In conclusion, let me make a few suggestions for the right hon. Gentleman to consider as he prepares his Green Paper and his universal credit review.

The back to work plan that we announced before the general election would have got 1.1 million people into work, using more support and tougher conditions—“more support” meaning more of the WorkWell pilots that my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) introduced. I was glad to hear the Secretary of State praising those pilots yesterday, although sadly without attribution. In our view, the work capability assessment should be face to face, and it should be asset-based, not deficit-based; it should be asking what a claimant can do, not what they cannot do. The claimant should begin the journey of recovery—the journey back towards work—then and there. Rather than budgeting for ever higher welfare, as we are doing today, we should be investing in a universal support system to run alongside universal credit.

We also need tougher conditions. We simply cannot have people with a bad back or anxiety being signed off sick for the rest of their lives; they need to know that we believe in them, and that believing in them means having high expectations of them. In exchange for benefits paid for by working people, claimants should take active steps, when they can, to address their physical and mental health needs, and they should work meaningfully on their own health and wellbeing. That will not look the same for everyone and it must not be a tick-box exercise. That is why we need the help of civil society, not just coaches and therapists, providing the human touch and the range of help and opportunities that people need.

[*Danny Kruger*]

Most of all, we need a clear message to go out from the Government that unless a person is so severely disabled or ill that they genuinely can never work at all, they will not have a life on benefits. That clear message, enacted through reform that the right hon. Gentleman's Department must bring forward urgently, is the only way to get our exorbitant welfare bills under control, and to get our workforce and our economy moving again.

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

2.31 pm

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I will start by commenting on the contribution made by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger). First, it is really important that in this place we use evidence, to help ensure that we have effective, evidence-based policy. When we are using policy-based evidence, that is quite dangerous. I am referring to his remarks about conditionality. I refer him to the evidence, such as the two-year study undertaken by the University of York, which showed that there was no evidence to support tough sanctions. People have lost their lives because of sanctions, and that study showed that there was no evidence to support stopping somebody's social security support—their money that they use to live—for up to two years, because that was the period that the Government of the day said benefits could be stopped for. That has real-life consequences.

I can also refer the shadow Minister to his own Cabinet Office reports, which showed that sanctions were not effective in getting people into work. We all need to be very responsible in what we say.

**Danny Kruger:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Debbie Abrahams:** No, I am sorry but I am not going to give way.

As a former public health consultant, I can also say that the key drivers of ill health are socioeconomic determinants. There is so much evidence for that, going back decades, and I wonder why Conservative Members are not familiar with it—whether it is just not palatable to them, or it is inconvenient. Much more recently, the covid inquiry that we debated a couple of weeks ago showed very clearly that one of the reasons why we had such a poor experience, both in terms of morbidity and mortality—more than any other country in Europe—was our ill health. It does a real disservice to the people who have lost their lives or are enduring long covid at the moment, to their families and their memories, to suggest that it is something else, let alone to the people who are—

**Danny Kruger:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Debbie Abrahams:** No, I am not going to give way. [*Interruption.*] I am not going to give way.

I welcome the social security order and, in particular, what my right hon. Friend the Minister has said about it. It was an absolute pleasure to serve on the Select Committee when he was its Chair, and in this respect I agree with the shadow Minister: my right hon. Friend's transfer from the Select Committee to his ministerial

position is very welcome. We all appreciate his gravitas and experience, but also his common decency in the role.

I want to talk about the context of this uprating order and the importance of our social security system in providing, at the very least, a safety net for people when they need it, and from cradle to grave, like the NHS. Unfortunately, though, over the past 14 to 15 years, the adequacy of support for people on low incomes has been dramatically eroded, particularly for people of working age—again, contrary to what the shadow Minister has said. Between 2010 and 2012, the uprating was about 1.5%; between 2012 and 2016, it was 1%; and between 2016 and 2020, it was zero. The average annual consumer prices index increase for each of those years was about 3%.

There has been a steady and consistent erosion in the value of social security support, which has affected the value of universal credit, jobseeker's allowance, employment and support allowance, income support, housing benefit, child tax credit, working tax credit and child benefit. The Resolution Foundation has estimated that this erosion was equivalent to a cut of £20 billion a year from social security support for working-age people. That is clearly not well understood by the Conservative party.

Something else that is not well understood is that these are predominantly people in low-paid work. The vast majority of people in receipt of working-age social security support are, or have been, working people—that is something for us all to consider. Only a tiny proportion of DWP spending is spent on jobseeker's allowance, for example—it is 0.001% of the current budget. As is evidenced in the Work and Pensions Committee's report from last year, which I invite shadow Ministers to read, out-of-work support is at the lowest level in real terms since 1912. This is not a generous system; according to OECD comparisons, we are not supporting people in the way that a civilised society as well off as we are should do.

The consequences of inadequate social security are clear. Last week's Joseph Rowntree Foundation poverty report made for bleak reading—again, I invite people to read it. Over one in five people in the UK are in poverty; that is 21%, or 14.3 million people. Of those, 8.1 million are working-age adults. Some 4.3 million children are in poverty—three in 10 among the population as a whole, while in my constituency the figure is one in two—and 1.9 million of those in poverty are pensioners.

Disabled people are at greater risk of poverty, partly by virtue of the additional costs that they face due to their disability and ill health, and partly due to the barriers to work that disabled people face. Disability employment has flatlined; when it comes to being in work, the gap between people who are not disabled and those who are has been about 30% for the past 14 years or so. It went down by about 1%. Some 16 million people in the UK are disabled—nearly one in four—and almost four in 10 families have at least one person who is disabled. The poverty rate for disabled people, which is 30%, is 10 percentage points higher than it is for non-disabled people. The rate is even higher—50%—for those living with a long-term, limiting mental health condition, compared with 29% for people with a physical disability or another type of disability.



Other groups of people are also disproportionately more likely to live in poverty, including former carers, people from ethnic minority communities and lone parents, but given the media speculation there has been about the future of disability support, I want to focus on that. Last year's Select Committee report on benefit levels set out a wide range of evidence suggesting that benefit levels are too low and that claimants are often unable to afford daily living costs and extra costs associated with having a health condition or disability. Although the Select Committee supports the Government's ambition to get Britain working and a social security system that supports work, these ambitions are not achievable within a few months. Meanwhile, people are barely clinging on.

The DWP does not have an expressed objective for how it will support claimants with daily essential living costs. In the Select Committee's report we recommended building a cross-party consensus to take this forward, and for the Government to outline and benchmark objectives linked to living costs to measure the effectiveness of benefit levels, and to make changes alongside annual uprating. I would welcome my right hon. Friend the Minister revisiting this Select Committee report, particularly our recommendations.

I would like to set out the consequences of our currently inadequate social security system. From peer-reviewed articles, we know that for every 1% increase in child poverty, six babies per 100,000 live births fail to reach their first birthday. That is the consequence of living in poverty for children. The hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), because of his medical training, will know much of this, but a rewiring of the brain of children living in poverty affects them for the rest of their lives.

In another peer-reviewed piece published in 2016 in a *BMJ* journal, entitled "First, do no harm", a metadata analysis of the impacts of the changes to and reassessment of the work capability assessment between 2010 and 2013 in 149 local authority areas in England found that, for each additional 10,000 people who were reassessed, there were an additional six suicides, 2,700 additional cases of mental health problems and over 7,000 more antidepressant scripts. This is evidence.

Many Members will know of my previous campaigns, and I want to refer to the deaths we have seen of social security claimants whose benefits have been stopped. I mention again Errol Graham, a 52-year-old Nottingham man with a severe mental health condition, who basically starved to death after his social security support was stopped. There are so many others I could mention, and I pay tribute to the families who have campaigned on their behalf for justice, because it is quite horrific.

Talking about people surviving our social security system, there is the case of TP—I will use his initials—also a 52-year-old man, who had worked all his life. He was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin lymphoma and, sadly, his diagnosis was terminal. He was trying to be migrated from his particular incapacity support to universal credit, and he lost all his disability premiums. He was one of the litigants in a case about transitional protections when migrating from ESA and disability premiums to universal credit. This is an example of somebody who has worked all their life, and four out of five disabilities and health conditions are acquired—it could happen to any one of us, and I would just like us to consider that.

In another case, AB was born with congenital cerebral palsy and worked for 25 years, but then could not go on. If I read out the whole story, we would all be in tears, because it is just heartrending, describing the indignity of having to rely on such low-level support.

I will leave it there, but I know my right hon. Friend the Minister takes this very seriously, and I hope all of us here will work towards making the social security system more adequate for those people.

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

2.45 pm

**Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD):** I would like to acknowledge the very sobering and comprehensive speech given by the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams). This is disturbing, and one would hope that our DWP, and our Government as a whole, would take a trauma-informed approach to dealing with our communities, as I believe that would stand us in good stead.

I broadly welcome the upratings in the proposals before us for both benefits and pensions, but I will focus first on pensions. Sadly, the Labour Government inherited a system under which, for the last 10 years, we have seen an increase in pensioner poverty. Two million pensioners remain in poverty, and 1 million are on the edge of poverty, and one would have hoped that a Labour Government wanting to cut the number in half and promoting social justice would have driven such an agenda harder in their first seven months in power. The cut to the winter fuel allowance has exacerbated this situation. The hon. Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger) highlighted the backlogs and rightly said that they are totally unacceptable. The reality is that we are seeing pensioner poverty.

Again, we know that women are more likely to be victims of poverty, yet the WASPI women have in effect been victims of a decision of this Government. It was really pleasing that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions welcomed the report, acknowledged it and apologised, but, sadly, she did not actually action the report. That gives me great displeasure, as well as many other people across the United Kingdom.

In evidence to the Work and Pensions Committee, the ombudsman suggested that there is usually a bit of a conversation between the ombudsman and the Government about what an acceptable system or approach to compensation would be. Sadly, however, that never happened as far as the WASPI women are concerned, which is disturbing, and I want to understand why. Why was there the breakdown in communication between the ombudsman and the previous Conservative Government? I am looking to explore that with the ombudsman in another way.

On pensions, I would also like to highlight the housing issues. I served my community for 30 years as a councillor, and I am therefore very alive to some of the challenges people face. Housing is a massive issue, and it is disturbing that, when reflecting on pensions, the cost of housing is rarely taken into account. In 1979, 35% of our housing stock was social rented housing. That figure is now down to 17% across the United Kingdom, and in my constituency of Torbay it is as low as 7%. This means that people, whether pensioners or those on other benefits,

[*Steve Darling*]

in constituencies such as mine where there is a lack of social rented housing are particularly hard-hit by that lack of support; they will have to take money away from putting food on the table in order to pay the rent. It is therefore disappointing that the local housing allowance has not been enhanced in this round. Almost 1 million children across the United Kingdom will be living in households that have this gap between their benefits and the cost of their accommodation and they will be driven even further into poverty.

On universal credit, colleagues have already mentioned the recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation report which highlighted that couples face a £55 a week gap between covering the basics and what they actually receive. That is a little over £2,800 a year, so people are being driven even deeper into poverty just around the basics on their universal credit offer.

Finally, on the carer's allowance scandal, while we Liberal Democrats welcome the Government's engagement and the review that is taking place, unanswered questions remain. We need to make sure this is addressed at pace to support people, because 136,000 people—the equivalent of the population of West Bromwich—are affected, owing £250 million. They fell foul of a system where people only need to earn £1 more a week and they do not then owe £52, they owe £4,200—tapers need to be implemented.

One of the real challenges we face is that the DWP service is, sadly, broken. It is not fit for purpose and needs redesigning. I have nothing but utter respect for the Secretary of State on this issue, and instead of driving new agendas we need to lift the bonnet and redesign the system, get it for purpose and, most importantly, co-design it with people who are disabled or benefit users, so that it can actually support them.

**Mr Lee Dillon** (Newbury) (LD): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech about those most in need of benefits and the difference they can make. He spoke about the WASPI women and about children in poverty, but does he agree that veterans could also be helped out more by the DWP, such as by the Government backing the Royal British Legion "Credit their Service" campaign to change legislation so that military compensation is not classed as income when calculating means-tested benefits? Does my hon. Gentleman agree that that group would benefit from such a change?

**Steve Darling**: My hon. Friend is right to highlight that. My hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) and I are awaiting a meeting with the Minister to explore that very issue and the RBL's campaign.

To conclude, I lived through a world of broken children's services in Torbay, but we rolled our sleeves up, sorted it out and moved from failing to good within two years by getting the right people in place, making sure systems were sorted out and driving culture change. We need that co-design with people who use the system so we can get the DWP sorted as well.

2.54 pm

**Dan Tomlinson** (Chipping Barnet) (Lab): First, I echo the comments of others in praising the Minister for his work on this issue over decades in this place. I saw it before becoming a Member of Parliament during my

time working in the charity sector at the Resolution Foundation and most recently at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. I was working on these issues, and I always knew then that we had a friend in Parliament who cared deeply about the welfare system and about the needs of people receiving benefits and support from the state, and who also, like me, wants to see more people being supported to move into employment. Even though I am not going to focus on that topic today as I want to talk about pensions, I do want to put on record my thanks for his service, and I am glad to see him as a Minister.

I want to start by talking about an institution that is not often discussed in this place but that is crucial to all of our lives and shapes a lot of politics even though we do not remark on it too much: the family. That is the institution that almost all of us are closest to and that shapes so much of the way we see the world. It is important that we as policymakers—as people sitting here in the House of Commons—do not just think of individuals as people on their own who are separate from one another and that we instead remember that we all exist in families. If we look at someone's biography online, it might say they are a father and a husband, because our families are a big part of our identities. We would do well to remember that.

Sometimes our politics and our media might want to push us into discussing pensions in a way that promotes the salience of a war between the generations, but nothing could be further from the truth.

**Mr Dillon**: The hon. Gentleman talks about the importance of family and I could not agree more, but does he also agree that a family is a unit designed by that family and an arbitrary limit of a two-child benefit cap does nothing to protect that family unit if they have more than two children?

**Dan Tomlinson**: I grew up in poverty. We had no money and lived in social housing. I had free school meals throughout my childhood, and the three of us were in emergency and temporary accommodation as well. And I know the benefit system was there for my mum and for us, and I have confidence that this Government will make the decisions that we need to make to ensure that our welfare system is there for families like the one I grew up in. I know a review is looking at universal credit and the welfare system, and I look forward to it reporting in the months ahead. This is a really important issue, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising it.

On families and the state pension, often people want to pit the young and the old against one another, but the evidence shows that young people are one of the most supportive groups for the increase in state pension. That is in part because we—I still call myself young now, in my early 30s—know and have seen throughout our lives how much people who are retired, such as our grandparents or older people we know in the community, have contributed to our lives and our families and also the lives of our communities. Also, to put on my economist's hat, increases in the state pension and support for the triple lock, which we on this side of the House steadfastly support, will benefit young people the most because an extra few pence on the state pension today means an extra few pounds—or tens of pounds or, depending on which generation we are talking about, hundreds of pounds—in the future because of the way

these things compound over time. It is really important we continue to support the state pension and the triple lock.

**Bobby Dean** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point about the long-term benefits to the economy from treating the benefits system seriously. Does he agree that that applies to the two-child cap as well because if we were to remove that not only would we lift hundreds of thousands of children out of poverty, which is inherently a good thing, but we would also improve health and education outcomes and ultimately make a more productive population over the long run?

**Dan Tomlinson:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention on the same important topic raised by the hon. Member for Newbury (Mr Dillon). I know that the Government are looking at this issue and at how we can reform the welfare system to support people to get the money they need and have the incentives and the right approach to welfare to help more people get into employment. That is the long-term sustainable route to reducing poverty and I hope we can do more to achieve it.

**Dr Luke Evans** *rose*—

**Dan Tomlinson:** I am happy to give way, although I perhaps should make some progress.

**Dr Luke Evans:** The hon. Member makes a fantastic point about the family unit. The last Government were looking at introducing a measure on household income, particularly with child benefit, to try to make sure that we see people not as individuals, but as a group. That could stop such things as the child benefit cliff edge. However, the new Government took that measure away in the Budget. Would he make the argument to his Front Benchers that looking at household units—the family unit—is a positive way of seeing how we can support people?

**Dan Tomlinson:** That is important in some respects. One of the challenges with the policy that the hon. Member identifies is that we tax people on an individual basis and the benefits he refers to are often linked to the tax system. He raises an important point, and I am sure it is being considered.

I will make some progress and conclude my remarks. I am supportive of the increase in the state pension and of the triple lock. I know we have already had a little ding-dong about it, but it is the case that the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride) said that the triple lock was unsustainable. Perhaps he was referring to the long term, but that still concerns me, not least given what I have said about young people benefiting most from increases in the state pension over time.

I am glad that in April the 20,000 pensioners in my constituency will receive either a £470 uplift if they are on the new state pension or, I believe, a £360 uplift if they are on the basic rate of state pension. That is incredibly important for living standards. I spent many years living with my grandparents part-time. They taught me a lot, and many of my values have come from them. We know how much care older people can provide to family and to their communities, and I see that in Chipping Barnet. At almost every community event,

whether that is a local church, an institution or a charity doing good in the community, there are so many retired people giving their time and care, making Barnet—my corner of north London that I have the pleasure of representing—a better place to live. Providing that security in retirement is so very important.

3.2 pm

**Seamus Logan** (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): I endorse the warm words of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger), in paying tribute to the Minister, the right hon. Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) and the work he has done in previous Parliaments. As a recently elected Member, I was not in the House then, but I was aware of the work being done. Some of the contributions we have had in this debate so far have been extremely powerful. The quality of the debate seems to be in inverse proportion to the number of Members present.

I rise not to oppose these orders but to focus specifically on the Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2025, or GMP. The order gives applicable pension schemes the percentage by which they need to uprate GMP entitlement built up between 1988 and 1997. This year the increase is 1.7%. Wow! That was informed by the CPI figure for the year to September 2024. While that increase and the other increases are welcome, they will not even touch the sides. We must remember that the Government have taken away the winter fuel payment. We have seen numerous increases in energy costs, and we are seeing rising food prices because of policies on national insurance contributions and now the family farm tax.

These matters are reserved, but all those years ago back in 2014, we were promised in the run-up to the referendum that we would receive maximum devolution. That has not happened. People in Scotland may not know this, but we have had to introduce seven different benefits to mitigate the effects of decisions made here in Westminster. Fair pensions are necessary for ensuring dignity in old age, but we must be aware of the unintended consequences when changes are made to the pension system. During the transition to single-tier pensions in 2016, the DWP was found by the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman not to have provided clear and accurate information that some pension holders were worse off under the changes. By the DWP's own figures, about 50,000 people would lose out. That failure in communication seems emblematic of an outdated approach to social security that saw people unfairly treated when changes were made to their pension provision. We saw that happen again with the WASPI women. The PHSO again found that the DWP had committed maladministration in communicating those pension changes to WASPI women.

Pensions and pension provision are wide-reaching. Last week, I raised the issue of prison officers and changes to their pension scheme that mean some of them will be working until they are 68. I again impress upon the Government the need to consider the unintended consequences of that and all other pension changes. That is perhaps even more pertinent now, as the state pension age is due to rise to 67 for men and women between 2026 and 2028, and to 68 between 2044 and 2046. The DWP failed on previous occasions when it came to communicating these changes to people regarding



[Seamus Logan]

their pensions. We have a new Government, and if they will not allow the Scottish people to determine their own future in these matters, or they will not devolve these matters to the Scottish Government, all I can ask is that they deliver fairness in pensions, because people need certainty when it comes to their retirement plans.

I agree with the hon. Member for Torbay (Steve Darling) when he mentioned the forthcoming review of the welfare system, and I wholeheartedly endorse the quiet words spoken by the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) when she made her powerful intervention talking about the socioeconomic determinants of ill health. That message cannot go unnoticed by the DWP in these matters.

3.6 pm

**Shockat Adam** (Leicester South) (Ind): It is a real honour to participate in this debate. I may not be as illustrious as previous contributors, but I will try my best to make whatever small impact I can. I start by commenting on a point made by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger) about believing in people and wanting the best for them. I wholeheartedly agree with that—we want the best for people and for them to be the best that they can—but simply believing is not enough. Simply believing that my children will achieve great grades at school without sending them to school or giving them the facilities and the tools is not enough. My team are in the relegation zone, and simply wanting them not to be relegated by belief will not be enough without investment in that football team. When we have had under-investment, especially in the mental health sector, we need more than just belief to achieve and to alleviate those problems. The semantics that we use specifically around our GPs, when we are sometimes questioning their credibility when they sign people off, are rather damaging.

I welcome the increase in pensions announced by the Secretary of State, but at this moment in time, as colleagues have mentioned, 1.9 million pensioners in the UK are living in relative poverty. Pensioners are missing meals, having to shelter in libraries and are depressed due to the Government's cuts to the winter fuel payment. Research conducted by Unite the union has shown that more than two thirds of its retired members are having to turn down their heating. A third are taking fewer baths and showers, and 16% have cut back on hot meals due to the increased costs of trying to stay warm. Heating or eating is a reality for many people; they are not just words that we utter in this Chamber.

In addition, more than 63% of people have said that they have felt more cold, more often and 17% are reporting that the cut has resulted in their becoming ill or their symptoms becoming worse. That is burdening our NHS, which is already overstretched. We must find a way, if possible, to release the statistics for excessive deaths caused by the cold weather.

**Neil Duncan-Jordan** (Poole) (Lab): You are making a very powerful case. Would you agree with me that—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani)**: Order. I am sure the hon. Member is not intervening on me, so the word “you” is not appropriate. Interventions should be brief.

**Neil Duncan-Jordan**: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker. Does the hon. Member agree that just as the Government are addressing child poverty by setting up a child poverty taskforce, they should set up a pensioner poverty taskforce for pensioner poverty?

**Shockat Adam**: I could not agree more; that would be vital for pensioners. Ever since I was elected, emails from pensioners on that issue have been in the top three issues—it is a real issue. If alongside increasing pensions we could reverse the cuts to the winter fuel payment, that would save lives.

**Madam Deputy Speaker**: That concludes the Back-Bench contributions. I believe that the Minister would like to do a short wind-up.

3.10 pm

**Sir Stephen Timms**: With the leave of the House, I thank everyone who has contributed to the debate. There have been some helpful contributions on important issues. I am grateful for the support expressed for the measures in the orders, and for the kind things said about me, which I will enjoy while they last. Let me thank in particular the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger), for drawing attention to the contributions of others who spoke in such debates in the past. He named Paul Maynard, David Linden and Nigel Mills, and he was absolutely right to do so.

I am particularly grateful to Nigel Mills for his help in the work of the Work and Pensions Committee, and I am delighted that the Committee is now in the good hands of my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams). She made an important contribution to the work of the Committee in the last Parliament, and had an important and positive influence over the whole direction of the Committee. She highlighted, as she often does, the position of vulnerable benefit claimants and how they are looked after. I look forward to giving evidence to her in the Committee next week as work resumes on an inquiry of the Committee from the last Parliament.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Torbay (Steve Darling), who called for a taper in carer's allowance. As he will have heard, the Chancellor announced in the Budget in November that we would look at the case for a taper. I hope to be able to update the House on that reasonably soon.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Dan Tomlinson) for what he said. He was right to draw attention to the high level of support among young people for the triple lock policy, which matters right across the age range.

The hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan) was right to call for certainty about pensions. People need to know what the position will be when they reach retirement age. The last Labour Government reduced the number of pensioners below the poverty line by a million. Sadly, as we have been reminded in this debate, it has gone up again over the last few years. We want to get back on the better track that we were on before. That was picked up in the remarks of the hon. Member for Leicester South (Shockat Adam).

**Seamus Logan**: Does the Minister agree that two measures that the Government could take that would

make a serious impact on the levels of poverty would be to restore the winter fuel payment and abolish the two-child cap?

**Sir Stephen Timms:** I have already spoken in the debate about the two-child cap, and we will be coming forward with the report and strategy proposed by the child poverty taskforce. On pensioner poverty, I think that substantial measures will be needed, and we will come forward with those in due course.

**Dr Luke Evans:** I am grateful to the Minister for taking another intervention. He talked about planning for the future and people understanding what is going on with their pensions. We have the WASPI example where that was not seen to be the case. The new Government are making changes to inheritance tax and where pensions fall, but much of the public do not realise that that will have big implications for them as their pensions will be subject to tax and inheritance tax. Would he consider a campaign to let people know that that change is coming in the next year or so?

**Sir Stephen Timms:** I am not quite sure what change the hon. Gentleman is referring to, but I certainly agree that people need to be confident about what the arrangements will be in the future so that they can plan accordingly. That is the one of the reasons why the pensions triple lock is important, as it gives people confidence about how things will be in the future.

We are: increasing the basic state pension and the new state pension in line with earnings growth by 4.1%, meeting our commitment to the triple lock; increasing the pension credit standard minimum guarantee in line with earnings growth by 4.1%; increasing benefits to meet additional disability needs and carers' benefits in line with prices; and increasing working-age benefits in line with prices as well, at 1.7%. This year, GMPs accrued between 1988 and 1997 must by law be increased by 1.7%, which is the increase in the consumer prices index in the year up to September 2024. The GMP is important in giving people assurance about a level below which their scheme pension cannot fall. I commend both orders to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That the draft Social Security Benefits Up-rating Order 2025, which was laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.

## PENSIONS

*Resolved,*

That the draft Guaranteed Minimum Pensions Increase Order 2025, which was laid before this House on 16 January, be approved.—  
(*Martin McCluskey.*)

## National Insurance Contributions

3.16 pm

**The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray):** I beg to move,

That the draft Social Security (Contributions) (Rates, Limits and Thresholds Amendments, National Insurance Funds Payments and Extension of Veteran's Relief) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.

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

That the draft Child Benefit and Guardian's Allowance Up-rating Order 2025, which was laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.

**James Murray:** Regulations are made each year to set various national insurance thresholds, and to uprate child benefit and the guardian's allowance. In opening the debate, I will give the House details of what the regulations set out to do. First, the Social Security (Contributions) (Rates, Limits and Thresholds Amendments, National Insurance Funds Payments and Extension of Veteran's Relief) Regulations 2025 set the rates of certain national insurance contribution classes and the level of certain thresholds for the 2025-26 tax year. The lower earnings limit, the small profits threshold and the rates of class 2 and class 3 contributions will all be uprated by the September consumer prices index figure of 1.7%, while the other limits and thresholds covered by the regulations will remain fixed at their existing levels.

The regulations also make provision for a Treasury grant—a transfer of wider Government funds—to be paid into the national insurance fund, if required, for the 2025-26 tax year. The regulations also, importantly, extend the veterans' employer national insurance contributions relief until April 2026. The scope of the regulations under discussion is limited to the 2025-26 tax year.

As hon. Members will know, national insurance contributions are social security contributions; people make contributions when they are in work to receive contributory benefits when they are not working—for example, after they have retired, or if they become unemployed. National insurance contribution receipts fund those contributory benefits, as well as helping to fund the NHS.

The primary threshold and the lower profits limit are the points at which employees and the self-employed start to pay employee class 1 and self-employed class 4 national insurance contributions respectively. The primary threshold and lower profits limit were frozen by the previous Government at £12,570 until April 2028. However, the level of those thresholds does not affect people's ability to build up entitlement to contributory benefits such as the state pension. For employees, entitlement is determined by their earnings being above the lower earnings limit, which the regulations will uprate from £123 a week in 2024-25 to £125 a week in 2025-26. That is the equivalent of an uprating from £6,396 to £6,500 a year.

Entitlement for self-employed people is determined by their earnings being above the small profits threshold, which the regulations will uprate from £6,725 in 2024-25 to £6,845 for 2025-26. Uprating the lower earnings limit and the small profits threshold is the usual process, and it maintains the real level of income at which people

[James Murray]

gain entitlement to contributory benefits. Wage growth is currently higher than inflation, which means that following the uprating by CPI, there will be a reduction in the number of hours that someone who has received a typical wage increase needs to work to gain entitlement compared with last year.

The upper earnings limit, which is the point at which the main rate of employee national insurance contributions drops to 2%, and the upper profits limit, which is the point at which the main rate of self-employed national insurance contributions drops to 2%, are aligned with the higher rate threshold for income tax at £50,270 a year. The previous Government also froze those thresholds until April 2028.

I now turn to the thresholds for employer national insurance contribution reliefs. As hon. Members are aware, the Government have had to make difficult decisions to fix the public finances. One of the toughest decisions that we faced was the decision to increase the rate of employer national insurance contributions and reduce the secondary threshold. Although those changes are the subject of a separate Bill, not these regulations, they are the context for why our decision to maintain other targeted national insurance contributions reliefs is so important. Those employer reliefs include those for under-21-year-olds, under-25 apprentices, veterans, and new employees in freeports and investment zones. The regulations that we are debating set these thresholds in line with other personal tax thresholds.

The regulations also provide for the national insurance contributions relief for employers of veterans to be extended for a year until April 2026. This measure means that next year, businesses will continue to pay no employer national insurance contributions on salaries up to the veterans upper secondary threshold of £50,270 for the first year of a qualifying veteran's employment in a civilian role.

**Mr Jonathan Brash** (Hartlepool) (Lab): I welcome the extension of national insurance contributions relief for veterans, but does the Minister agree that we need to do more to ensure that employers across the country know that the relief exists, to incentivise employing veterans?

**James Murray:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we want employers to be aware of this important relief, and to encourage them to make use of it to employ veterans. This relief helps to support those who have already given so much to our country, and it also means that the skills and the huge potential of those people who have already given such service to our country can be used to make a further contribution to our country and our economy. We want all employers to know that this relief exists. We can all play a role as local MPs in making sure that all employers in our constituencies are aware of this important relief. I thank my hon. Friend for letting me make that point.

The continuation of the veterans relief is evidence of the Government's commitment to supporting our veterans. As I explained in response to my hon. Friend's intervention, it is intended to incentivise employers to take advantage of the wide range of skills and experience that ex-military personnel offer. As I said, it is important that we support those who have given so much to our country

by helping to make sure that our country benefits further from the skills and potential of our service leavers.

Let me move on to the national insurance fund, into which the majority of national insurance contributions are paid, and which is used to pay the state pension and other contributory benefits. The Treasury has the ability to transfer funds from wider Government revenues into the national insurance fund. The regulations make provision for a transfer of this kind, known as a Treasury grant, of up to 5% of forecasted annual benefit expenditure to be paid into the national insurance fund, if needed, in 2025-26. A similar provision will be made in respect of the Northern Ireland national insurance fund.

The Government Actuary's Department report laid alongside these regulations forecasts that a Treasury grant will not be required in 2025-26, but as a precautionary measure, the Government consider it prudent to make provision at this stage for a Treasury grant. That is consistent with what has been done in previous years.

I turn to the draft Child Benefit and Guardian's Allowance Up-rating Order 2025. As hon. Members will know, the Government are committed to delivering a welfare system that is fair for taxpayers while providing support to those who need it. The order will ensure that the benefits for which Treasury Ministers are responsible, and which His Majesty's Revenue and Customs delivers, are uprated by inflation in April 2025. Child benefit and the guardian's allowance will increase in line with the consumer prices index, which had inflation at 1.7% in the year to September 2024. Uprating by the preceding September's CPI is the Government's typical approach. Tax credit awards will end on 5 April 2025, so no changes to rates will be required from 2025-26 onwards.

I hope all Members will support the regulations. Rejecting them would mean that HMRC-administered benefits would not rise at all next year, and so would lose value in real terms. The regulations fix most of the rates and thresholds for the national insurance contributions that they cover at the 2024-25 levels for the 2025-26 tax year, except for the lower earnings limit, the small profits threshold, and the rates of class 2 and class 3 contributions, which will all be updated by the September 2024 CPI rate of 1.7%. The regulations also make provision for a Treasury grant. They extend the veterans employer national insurance contributions relief, and increase the rates of child benefit and the guardian's allowance in line with prices.

**Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): The Minister talked about the Treasury grant being up to 5%. As a matter of curiosity, what figure had Treasury planned to put in?

**James Murray:** The regulations contain a provision for us, in case it is needed. The expectation is that it will not be. As I mentioned, a Government Actuary's Department report laid alongside the regulations has forecast that the Treasury grant will not be required in 2025-26. The provision in the regulations is a precautionary measure, and is in line with what has happened in previous years. The Government consider it prudent to continue the practice of previous years, and to make provision for the grant in these regulations. I hope that answers the hon. Gentleman's question.



The regulations enable an increase in child benefit and the guardian's allowance in line with prices. Without these regulations, HMRC would be unable to collect national insurance contributions receipts, and child benefit and guardian's allowance would be frozen at the 2024-25 levels. I hope that colleagues will join me in supporting the regulations.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** Before I call the shadow Minister, I inform the Liberal Democrat spokesman that I will call him immediately afterwards.

3.27 pm

**Gareth Davies (Grantham and Bourne) (Con):** I welcome the opportunity to contribute on behalf of His Majesty's Opposition. As the Minister said, the first statutory instrument sets rates, limits and thresholds for national insurance contributions for the 2025-26 tax year. It covers the rate of class 2 NICs, the small profits threshold, the rate of voluntary class 3 NICs, the zero-rate relief on secondary class 1 NICs for qualifying armed forces veterans—a Conservative Government legacy that we are very proud of—and the various upper secondary thresholds and the upper limits and thresholds that determine class 1 NICs.

These regulations also allow for payments of a Treasury grant not exceeding 5% of the estimated benefit expenditure for the 2025-26 tax year. This is to be made into the national insurance fund, with a corresponding provision for Northern Ireland. We welcome the uprating with CPI of the class 1 lower earnings limit and the class 2 small profits threshold, but the overall picture in these regulations is one of continuity, not of change.

The secondary threshold, however, is the exception. Although the regulations leave it unchanged, that will not last for very long. They will be overridden by the National Insurance Contributions (Secondary Class 1 Contributions) Bill, which is under consideration in the other place. It will cut the secondary threshold from a weekly level of £176 to £96 in the coming tax year, on top of raising the secondary class 1 NICs rate to 15%.

The disastrous, job-destroying consequences of Labour's £25 billion tax on working people are well known by now, and have been debated in this place many times. They are also widely acknowledged, from the independent Office for Budget Responsibility to the left-wing Resolution Foundation. This time last year, when in opposition, the Minister put on record his concern over the distributional impact of the freezes on allowances, limits and thresholds, which his Government are in large part continuing. We accept that these are difficult decisions, but we took them to return the public finances to a sustainable footing in the aftermath of the double crisis of the pandemic and the energy price shock driven by the disgraceful invasion of Ukraine.

If the Minister was concerned about the distributional impact back then, and in particular about

“the post-tax income for low and middle earners”—[*Official Report, Sixth Delegated Legislation Committee, 7 February 2024; c. 6.*],

I wonder just how concerned he is now, in the context of his own party's Budget. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown that the largest percentage increases in labour costs will be inflicted on lower-wage workers; meanwhile, as much as 76% of the additional tax burden will be passed on to those same workers in the form of lower

real wages, according to the independent OBR. Does the Minister agree with the OBR and the IFS on the distributional impact of the NICs tax hike?

**Dr Luke Evans:** My hon. Friend has talked about context, which is really important. This is a finance SI, but the wider context is that another Bill is being brought forward—the Employment Rights Bill—that is estimated to cost £5 billion on top of existing tax measures in the Budget. Does he think that that will have a direct impact on people who are trying to find work? There is a chance, surely, that more people will be let go and made unemployed because of this potential cost and impact.

**Gareth Davies:** I completely agree with the point that my hon. Friend is making, which has also been made to me by several local businesses in my constituency. This is a double whammy. We have a tax increase that will increase the cost of doing business and affect the profitability of businesses and, in some cases, their survival; in addition, they are being hit with additional regulation, which businesses themselves, including the CBI, have made clear will add to the burden of regulation and make it less easy to hire people and, in some cases, to keep them. This double whammy, I am afraid, will result in job freezes at best, and, in some tragic cases, to job losses. I think we should all be very concerned about that.

To be fair to the Minister, he has in the past expressed great concern about the lower-paid in our society across all constituencies. Has he therefore undertaken his own distributional analysis of changes to national insurance rates, limits and thresholds in the round? If he has, does that analysis show anything different from what the OBR and the IFS have shown?

I would like to highlight the fact that the impact note for this specific statutory instrument predates the October Budget. I hope there is an updated impact analysis to consider the new context—surely there is. I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm that and show it to us.

Finally, I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm whether the Treasury is considering an extension of the veterans zero-rate relief beyond 2026, or whether that will now act as a final sunset date for the relief. He is absolutely right to say that we all have a part to play in highlighting this relief to businesses. We all want to see veterans hired in our country. My constituency has one of the largest populations of veterans, and I, with others on the Opposition Benches, will certainly join the Minister in doing anything we can to better inform businesses of this benefit. However, it would be good if he could confirm whether there are any plans or intentions to extend the relief beyond the 2026 point set out in the regulations.

As the Minister said, the second statutory instrument uprates child benefit and guardian's allowance in line with CPI for the 2025-26 tax year. These benefits are an important part of our welfare system, and we welcome the vital support that they provide. However, as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has pointed out,

“Work is the most important route out of poverty”, and we agree. Between 2010 and 2024, Conservative Governments helped to create 4 million jobs. The proportion of children living in workless households fell from 16%

[Gareth Davies]

to 10%. Even as employment increased, the proportion of all jobs considered low paid declined from 20% in 2010 to just 3.4% in 2024, which I hope the whole House welcomes and recognises.

Labour has never left office with unemployment lower than it found it, and within four months of its first Budget unemployment is on the rise, with the number of workers on payrolls dropping by the most we have seen since the peak of the pandemic. Meanwhile, the OBR says that Labour's jobs tax will weigh on real wages. With inflation also expected to rise in the near term, and many of the Minister's Back-Bench Labour colleagues no doubt taking the view that child benefit provision is not generous enough, have the Government prepared an assessment of the impact of their Budget measures on levels of child poverty over the next 12 months, and in particular of the impact their jobs tax may have through higher unemployment and lower pay? Finally, is the Minister confident that this uprating will cancel out any adverse consequences of the Budget, such as those I have raised?

3.35 pm

**Steve Darling** (Torbay) (LD): The Liberal Democrats welcome the Minister's suggestion that today's proposals are yoked to the national insurance increases going through the other place. Since the general election, we have had doom and gloom from the Labour party until very recently. The uncertainty around the Budget and the national insurance increases that are yet to hit has only put the cold hand around the economic growth that we need to see pumping harder in our economy.

In my own part of the world in the west country, it is having a massive impact on the tourism industry. The fact that the thresholds at which people start to pay national insurance are going down from £9,200 to £5,000 means that businesses in my constituency, such as Paignton pier, Paignton zoo and Splashdown, all have massive increases in seasonal worker costs, through both the threshold hitting harder and the increases in national insurance costs. When I speak to businesses such as Splashdown in Paignton, they tell me that it means they will probably operate for a shorter time and that they may look at reducing the number of staff they take on. Sadly, the national insurance increase is a jobs tax on our tourism industry, as well as on the rest of our economy.

I am only too well aware that the cost to hospitality is £1 billion. That is extremely disturbing. Again, people will not be taken on due to those cost pressures. Therefore, this really is a jobs tax.

**Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I am very interested in what my hon. Friend is saying about the threat to jobs. At the other end of the country, the north of Scotland, we have the same issue. The loss of any jobs in the hospitality industry is disastrous, when we do not have much employment anyway. We would like much more—let us put it that way.

**Steve Darling**: I am delighted with my hon. Friend's intervention, because the Liberal Democrats represent the full length of the United Kingdom from Shetland to

the Isles of Scilly, and it is important that we hear about that impact from a breadth of colleagues. The Liberal Democrats represent some of the best places to go on holiday across the UK.

There is a significant high-tech industry in Torbay. Again, businesses in that manufacturing industry tells me that their owners abroad may ask them to offshore some of their manufacturing to places such as Taiwan, where taxes on employment are significantly lower. That is another significant impact of the rise in national insurance contributions.

Bay Care is an outstanding social care business, but Kat Hall, one of its senior managers, tells me that this measure will have a significant impact. The business operates within very tight margins, and it will have to reduce services or limit its offer to our communities in South Devon and Torbay. Those reductions will inevitably have an impact on the social care offer.

Finally, let me say something about the voluntary sector. Torbay Communities gives outstanding service to the people of South Devon and Torbay, but the national insurance increases will confront it with considerable challenges. It will have to think about whether to reduce its staff and stop supporting some of the most vulnerable people in the area—people who are in need. With due respect to the Minister, I ask the Government to reflect on these increases and to see how they can alleviate them, particularly in the hospitality, social care and voluntary sectors.

3.41 pm

**James Murray**: With the leave of the House, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will respond to the comments of hon. Members.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Grantham and Bourne (Gareth Davies), set out the official Opposition's response to the regulations and the order that are before us, but his speech related largely to the changes being made by a different piece of legislation—a Bill—so I will be careful not to try your patience, Madam Deputy Speaker, by veering into that legislation, and will remain strictly within the confines of the regulations and the order.

Let me say briefly, however, that as the hon. Gentleman knows, we had to take difficult decisions in the Budget last October, and one of the toughest was the decision to increase the rate of employer national insurance contributions and lower the secondary threshold. The reason we had to take those difficult decisions was the fiscal situation that we had inherited from the Government of which he was a member. I note that in his recollection of history, he referred to a double crisis; I think that it was, at the very least, a triple crisis, given Liz Truss's premiership in the country and leadership of his party, so he may have omitted certain facts from the historical record, although I am sure that the wider British public will make no such mistake.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about some of the impacts of the national insurance changes. Again, he was speaking about a Bill rather than the statutory instruments that we are discussing, and for that separate Bill a tax information and impact note has been published, as is standard practice. I welcomed his support for our extension of veterans relief for a year, until April 2026, to help more ex-service personnel into employment. As the

scope of the regulations is limited to the 2025-26 tax year, they could extend it only by one year, but we think it important for that to be done.

The hon. Gentleman also spoke about work being the best way out of poverty, and I entirely agree with him in that regard. When we are creating jobs and ensuring that businesses can invest and provide work opportunities for people throughout the country, it is important for those jobs to be decent jobs with decent pay, and our changes to the national living wage are of course important in that respect. Overall, in relation to all the measures in the Budget, the Office for Budget Responsibility has concluded that the employment level will rise from 33.1 million to 34.3 million between 2024 and 2029.

The spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats, the hon. Member for Torbay (Steve Darling), also spoke about a Bill rather than the regulations that we are debating. I want to reassure him by pointing to the comments that the Chancellor has made since taking office last July. Since her first few days in No. 11 Downing Street, she has been determined to boost growth by getting rid of the ban on onshore wind turbines, reforming the way in which pensions can invest, and ensuring that the planning and regulatory barriers get out of the way of the growth that we are determined to achieve for this country.

The Chancellor's growth speech last week was just the latest example of her leadership in taking those decisions, which are the right ones for our country, to boost investment and growth. We know that having a stable set of public finances is a prerequisite for that investment and growth. The difficult decisions that both Opposition spokespeople referred to are slightly off the topic of the regulations in front of us, but they none the less drew attention to the fact that those difficult decisions were precisely to restore the public finances, while supporting public services, therefore allowing investment to increase and seeking the growth that we are determined to deliver for this country.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That the draft Social Security (Contributions) (Rates, Limits and Thresholds Amendments, National Insurance Funds Payments and Extension of Veteran's Relief) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.

*Resolved,*

That the draft Child Benefit and Guardian's Allowance Up-rating Order 2025, which was laid before this House on 15 January, be approved.—(*James Murray.*)

## BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (5 FEBRUARY)

*Ordered,*

That at the sitting on Wednesday 5 February, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 16 (Proceedings under an Act or on European Union documents), the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on—

(1) the Motion in the name of Secretary Yvette Cooper relating to Police Grant Report not later than three hours after the start of proceedings on that Motion, and

(2) the Motions in the name of Secretary Angela Rayner relating to Local Government Finance not later than three hours after the start of proceedings on the first such Motion or six hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion relating to Police Grant Report, whichever is the later; proceedings on those Motions may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Lucy Powell.*)

## Business without Debate

### DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

#### MEDICINES

That the draft Medicines for Human Use (Clinical Trials) (Amendment) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 12 December 2024, be approved.—(*Martin McCluskey.*)

*Question agreed to.*

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

#### SPACE INDUSTRY

That the draft Space Industry (Licence Exemption for Military Activities of Allies) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 12 December 2024, be approved.—(*Martin McCluskey.*)

*Question agreed to.*

#### PARLIAMENTARY WORKS ESTIMATES COMMISSION

*Resolved,*

That Ms Nusrat Ghani and Nick Smith be confirmed as members of the Parliamentary Works Estimates Commission under Schedule 3 to the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act 2019.—(*Lucy Powell.*)



## Bereaved Parents: Birth Certificates

*Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.*—(Martin McCluskey.)

3.47 pm

**Caroline Voaden** (South Devon) (LD): Twenty-two years ago, I became part of a club that no one wants to join: the young widows club. My husband Nick died of oesophageal cancer, and I was left with an 18-month-old baby and a toddler. Over the course of the next couple of years, I met dozens of young widows, including Beth, whose husband Simon had died of bowel cancer just two days before their beautiful baby daughter Elsa was born. Beth and I navigated this strange and unwelcome new reality together, spending time with our three little girls, who were all too young to understand the awfulness of what had happened.

Beth was part of an even smaller, even more unlucky club than me: the one where you have to give birth alone, to a baby you have longed for, while at the same time grieving for the partner you have lost and the future you will never share. For many of those tragically unlucky women, it gets even worse. Every year in the UK, around 200 young bereaved women are drawn into a ridiculous, unnecessary and costly legal battle to have their baby's father's name registered on the birth certificate. Incredibly, in 2025, if a woman is pregnant when their partner dies but they are not married, the law says that they cannot automatically name the father on the birth certificate. If ever there was a case of adding insult to injury, that has to be it.

The law seems to think that if a woman is legally married, there is no question but that her baby is her husband's. But if she has been living in a committed relationship, perhaps for years on end, the fact that she does not have a ring on her finger means that the paternity of her child is in question. Having been through the unimaginable experience of losing her partner while carrying his child, and then giving birth alone, she is then expected to enter into a legal process to prove that he was indeed the father, so that the child does not grow up with a blank space on their birth certificate. This is out of date, out of touch and, frankly, quite traumatic for all those involved. Women have described it as demeaning, insulting and overwhelming.

The reality is that more and more couples are choosing to live together without getting married. In 2022, the number of children born outside marriage in the UK surpassed the number of babies born to parents who were married or in a civil partnership for the first time since records began in 1845, according to figures from the Office for National Statistics. It is high time the law was updated to remove this anachronistic insult to unmarried mothers.

Not long after I was widowed, I became involved with a brilliant organisation called WAY—Widowed and Young. It is where I met Beth and made many other lifelong friends. WAY has been running the Blank Space campaign to try to change this out-of-date law, which penalises people for not being married. I commend WAY for its campaigning and am proud to bring this issue before the Minister so that the anomaly can be addressed. The women I will talk about are all members of WAY, and I thank them for sharing their stories.

Nicola and her partner Stewart had been through a successful in vitro fertilisation journey, which was needed because he had had testicular cancer 10 years earlier. Six weeks after a positive pregnancy test, they found out that Stewart's cancer had returned, and he died seven months into Nicola's pregnancy, so he never got the chance to meet the son he had so desperately fought for. Nicola booked an appointment with the registrar, knowing that she would be going alone, but she took as much paperwork as possible to show that Stewart was the father. She had a range of hospital documents signed by him, which not only proved that he was the father but detailed his documented wishes for their embryos if he were to die. However, the registrar explained to Nicola that because she and Stewart were not married, he had to be physically present to be named on the birth certificate. Her evidence did not count, and she was sent away with a birth certificate that had a blank space where Stewart's name should have been. Nicola says:

"We had made this baby together, literally and scientifically, and for him not to be recognised at all was devastating."

It took a year and over £1,000 to get to court. Stewart's father went along to attend the hearing with Nicola, and it took just a few minutes for the court to discuss and approve the change, and to add Stewart's name to the birth certificate. It was almost as if the court could not believe that she had had to go through the process in the first place. Given the overwhelming evidence and the support of blood relatives, it was the obvious decision. She says:

"To have to go through this whilst bringing up a newborn on my own and grieving was utterly humiliating and exhausting."

I can attest to the fact that no young widow who is learning to be a mum and grieving at the same time should ever have to fight to have their partner listed on a birth certificate, and many of them cannot afford to do so, even if they wanted to.

Paula was 18 weeks pregnant when her partner was killed while cycling to work. Despite having his DNA and a proven 99.9% match, it took three and a half years for her to get a birth certificate with his name on it, and the process cost nearly £3,000.

Eleanor's partner Robin was killed in a road traffic accident 18 days before his baby daughter was born. Eleanor says:

"If you haven't been through this situation, you may not understand how demeaning this rule is. It made me feel like I wasn't to be trusted, as if an unmarried woman has no rights or voice. My partner and I lived together and planned to have a child—we just weren't married. It wasn't a one-night stand, and simple tax records would have proven that. While I shouldn't have had to prove anything beyond my word, I would have willingly provided documentation and statements from both our families to confirm our relationship."

In the end, the complexity and expense of having to fight the system proved too much for Eleanor, so her daughter's birth certificate was never changed and the blank space remains.

These examples show just how difficult and cruel this situation is, and they also show that the process can be very different depending on where a woman lives, which court she applies to, and who hears the application. Like so many other things, it can become a bit of a postcode lottery.

Under UK law, a birth needs to be registered within 42 days. If the parents are unmarried, they both have to be present to be named on the birth certificate—one

parent cannot add the other. If a parent has died, the surviving parent can amend the birth certificate at a future date to include the deceased parent's name, but they have to apply first to the family court for a declaration of parentage. This involves a form and a court fee of £365, and the court application takes three to four months to be processed. Then, at an initial court hearing, a senior family judge will consider the application. Many judges have never come across this process, and I have read stories of young widows not only having to go through the process themselves, but having to explain it to judges and court administrators while doing so.

There may be a second hearing some months later, and in between there will be requests for DNA, evidence and witness statements. If the court approves, it will issue a document confirming that the deceased person was the child's parent, and it then makes a declaration at a court hearing. This will then be sent to the registrar of births, deaths and marriages, and it can then take several more weeks for the re-registering of the birth to be completed.

I am sure I do not need to tell Members that this is a tortuous process—one of those bits of bureaucracy that seems ridiculous when we spell out the whole process, as I have done here. At the best of times it would be frustrating and slow. At the worst of times, it can simply be too much to cope with. The paperwork of death is long, frustrating and sometimes complicated. I remember being told by one organisation that it had to have written confirmation from my husband to close an account, even though I had written to it to say that he had died. I would like to think that things have moved on in the last 23 years, but we seem to have created a system that overcomplicates everything.

Clearly, it would not be right for someone to be able to put someone else's name down on a birth certificate as the father without reasonable proof; what WAY is campaigning for is a way to resolve this issue so that women whose partners have died during pregnancy can follow a clear and simple process to register their partner on their child's birth certificate. It should not cost thousands of pounds, and it should not be so complicated that some women just give up through frustration.

In Switzerland, France and Germany, unmarried fathers can declare their parentage early in the pregnancy to protect their rights. We have parental responsibility agreements here for unmarried fathers, so perhaps one answer would be to bring that forward into pregnancy so that if the worst, most unimaginable tragedy happened during pregnancy, there would be one less thing for newly widowed mums to have to worry about. Doctors could make a record of who the father is when the pregnancy is first entered into medical records, and this could be used as a legal document. Advice could be given at antenatal appointments, bringing people's attention to the issues that can arise for parents who are not married, so that they could be more aware. The executor could be called in as a witness to confirm paternity. There are ways around this if we are creative and clever. In honour of Nicola, Paula, Elanor and their children, I look forward to hearing how the Minister will take this dilemma forward and hopefully find an answer.

When you are widowed young, you lose so much. You lose the partner you love, you lose the life you had built together and you lose the future you had planned.

Your children lose their father—or sometimes their mother—their family is never the same again, and their lives will be shaped in many ways by the loss, however young they are when it happened. Being widowed when pregnant is all this and more. The trauma of birthing and grieving at the same time runs deep and lasts a lifetime. I really hope that the Government will move swiftly to make some changes so that one tiny little bit of this awful journey is made easier for those who have to navigate it.

3.58 pm

**Laurence Turner** (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) on bringing forward this incredibly important debate and thank her for having the strength to share her experience. She has shone a light on a matter that will resonate with people in every constituency across the country.

I rise to raise a related matter that has been brought to my attention and to the attention of other representatives in Birmingham by one of my constituents, Wunmi Babalola. Last year, she and her partner Charlie lost their infant son, Kayode Babalola-Fellows. Her experience of registering Kayode's death was much more difficult than it needed to be. They found themselves sitting in Birmingham register office alongside new parents who were registering their own children's births, and they were required to attend two separate appointments on the same day to register the birth and their son's passing. Wunmi said:

"I was already feeling the pain of our loss so much and when we arrived we had to sit and wait our turn with everyone else, including with parents with their babies registering their births. I felt my loss so intensely in that moment, it hit me like a ton of bricks... It should be a joyful time for new parents, while obviously for us it was an awful, traumatic one. I just didn't feel those two worlds should have to collide like they did."

I also pay tribute to Councillor Carmel Corrigan, who is a representative for Kings Norton North in my constituency. Last week, Birmingham city council carried her motion calling on the authority to work with the register office to secure an appointed officer with seniority and experience to support families through their grief, so that people who experience baby loss do not have to register their baby's death alongside parents who are registering births, and to explore what additional support the registry service and the NHS can provide to parents in that situation.

Carmel spoke about the loss of her own son, Aodhan Hay, 28 years ago, when she experienced something very similar. If something can come out of this debate, I hope it is attention for the issues raised by the hon. Member for South Devon and for the situation that my constituents faced, because if we can prevent a similar ordeal for other bereaved parents, we will have done some good.

I pay tribute to all the campaigners, including the hon. Lady, who have taken some form of good from the hardest pain and dearest loss to provide some comfort to others. I ask the Minister to look at the good work undertaken in Birmingham and to assess the case for national guidance and support for register offices, so that the circumstances that Wunmi and Charlie faced do not happen again.

4.2 pm

**The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Sarah Sackman):** I thank the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for securing this debate on an important and emotive subject. I start by saying how sorry I am for the loss that she and her family suffered, and how much I admire her resilience in coming to this House to share her story. That takes a huge amount of courage.

The circumstances in which the hon. Lady and others have lost co-parents are heartbreaking indeed. The Government are determined to ensure that the justice system is better able to support children and families, and particularly mothers who have lost the father of their child.

The hon. Lady helpfully outlined the current process for registering a parent's name on a birth certificate when that parent has passed away, but it is important to set out precisely how this works. Under section 55A of the Family Law Act 1986, in situations where a child is born to unmarried parents and the father is deceased prior to birth, a declaration of parentage must be issued by the court for paternity to be established. It is right that a fee is attached to this application, but it is important to say that there are mechanisms in place to support those who cannot afford the fee.

The help with fees scheme considers a range of factors, including an applicant's income, their savings and whether they receive any benefits, so that the fee can be waived in certain circumstances. Once a declaration is issued, the birth can then be re-registered to include the father's details or, to put it another way and as we have heard, to fill in that blank space.

To recognise the challenges that mothers face when seeking a declaration of parentage, a key intention of the provisions in family proceedings is to make the process as simple as possible in the most difficult of circumstances, while at the same time ensuring that the court has the means to establish parentage if one parent is deceased and is not, of course, able to convey their views themselves.

That process, while we have to emphasise simplicity and ease for those going through the toughest of circumstances, is an important one. It is important because in some cases the process can bear on significant financial implications for others, such as children from previous relationships, and can bear on issues such as nationality and others that touch on the best interests of the child. While ensuring the process is clear and simple to support bereaved parents, the courts must therefore have a process that instils confidence in the important details that a birth certificate contains.

**Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab):** I want to add my congratulations to the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) on securing this incredibly important debate.

The Minister has spoken well on the process involved. If a couple are married when the father dies while the woman is pregnant, it is a relatively simple process to register that person as the father of the child. It is a much more complicated matter for people where the couple are not married. I suggest, and I hope my hon. Friend agrees, that legislation might not have kept pace with societal change and with the reality of how couples now choose to live when they plan families.

**Sarah Sackman:** My hon. Friend is right to reflect on the growing number of couples in this country who cohabit and for whom marriage is not something they have chosen. It is right, too, that in general the law keeps up, to reflect that sort of societal change. I will come in due course to discuss more widely what the Government are doing in that space. I return, however, to the essential point that while clarity, simplicity and affordability are important in the registration process, particularly to support bereaved parents, we must have a process that instils confidence in what the birth certificate contains.

I thank the hon. Member for South Devon for drawing attention to Widowed and Young's campaign. As she rightly points out, it does some absolutely amazing work, particularly for those younger people who have tragically lost a spouse or life partner. I can reassure the hon. Member now that the Government take the matter incredibly seriously and we are working hard to improve the family justice system for children and families.

Widowed and Young advocates for a simplified court process. We know that delays in the court process add to the distress when someone is going through bereavement. That can have a significant impact on children and families. We are committed to improving timeliness and reducing the outstanding caseload in the family court. That is why we have set ambitious targets for reducing delays in 2024-25 and have focused on closing the longest-running cases, not least so that can free up court time to deal with precisely the sorts of processes to which the hon. Member draws attention.

To further support those who use the family court, we are committed to improving digital solutions to support families with exploring various options for resolving child arrangement disputes early and away from court whenever possible. That is an area where digital solutions can be brought to bear on the sorts of issues that have been raised today. The Ministry of Justice is working on testing and developing various digital innovations that aim to support users in the private family justice system to help those families find the right information at the right time for them to reach agreements where that is appropriate, and particularly in the sorts of processes and proceedings under focus, which in the vast majority of cases are entirely non-contentious.

Let me turn to the wider issue of cohabitation reform. The subject that the hon. Member for South Devon raises and that others have raised today speak to the broader issues for cohabiting couples in our society who, under existing law, have only limited financial protections compared with those who are married or in a civil partnership. I know that a number of colleagues across the House have written to my Department about this, and my noble friend Lord Ponsonby was pleased to attend a parliamentary roundtable to discuss it last November.

We know that the limited rights and protections available to cohabitants can affect the most vulnerable in our society who are often affected at the most difficult stages in life, such as when a partner dies, or at the point of separation. We know, too, that those limited rights and protections disproportionately affect women, including victims of domestic and economic abuse, as well as their children. With the number of cohabiting couples in the UK having more than doubled over the past 30 years, it is important, as others have said, that law reflects the



society in which we now live. That indeed is why the Government set out in our manifesto a commitment to strengthen the rights and protections available to women in cohabiting couples. We will be setting out the next steps on this manifesto commitment—how we intend to implement it—as soon as possible.

The issue raised by the hon. Member for South Devon speaks directly to those challenges that sometimes face parents who are unmarried. I would like to thank her once again for securing this important debate and pay tribute to her bravery in coming forward to talk about it. I hope that this is the start of a conversation. I hope that she and I can discuss in more depth very soon the sorts of changes that might be necessary to better protect people in law, and I look forward to working with her to that end.

While I am on my feet, let me also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) for the related issue that he raises

and let me extend my personal condolences to the family involved. They have been through one of the worst things imaginable in my view. Certainly, processes of administration—of registration—should not be designed to exacerbate that. If he will write to me with that particular case, I would be happy to take a look at it, and I look forward to working with him on how we can address and mitigate the distress of parents of children who die in childbirth.

Once again, let me thank the hon. Member for South Devon for securing this important debate. I look forward to working with her on how we can ameliorate the situation for those for whom she is campaigning.

*Question put and agreed to.*

4.11 pm

*House adjourned.*



# Westminster Hall

*Tuesday 4 February 2025*

[CHRISTINE JARDINE *in the Chair*]

## Apprenticeships

9.30 am

**Andrew Pakes** (Peterborough) (Lab) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered the value of apprenticeships and National Apprenticeships Week.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. It is my first debate of this nature. I thank the Backbench Business Committee and its Chair, the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), for granting me the time for this important topic. I declare an interest ahead of this debate: I am co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on apprenticeships. I also declare that skills and apprenticeships are my political passion in this House.

We are about to celebrate National Apprenticeships Week, which runs next week. It is right that we celebrate the success of more than 750,000 apprenticeships that are powering skills and productivity in our local economies. I have had the privilege of meeting and visiting more than 100 businesses and their apprentices since I was elected. The breadth, talent and determination have been humbling, from butchers' apprentices in Newborough and engineering students at Caterpillar in my constituency, to construction apprentices at Laing O'Rourke building a new Olympia, to, most recently, brilliant and creative learners at the Fashion Retail Academy. One of the most inspiring days I have spent as an MP was meeting learners and employers at the National Theatre to understand more about how we support apprenticeships in the creative arts.

**Leigh Ingham** (Stafford) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate. The creative industries have been identified as a growth-driving sector, and I know the Government recognise the impact of the arts on the wider economy. We must build more talent pipelines and widen the accessibility of careers in the arts for the longevity of the sector. In my role as co-chair of the APPG for theatre, I have looked at the critical skill shortages that the sector faces in technical, backstage roles, from lighting to sound technicians and wigs, hair and makeup. That is why it is crucial for Skills England to review the seasonality of theatre work and explore the development of shorter-term apprenticeships to widen access to those entry-level roles.

**Christine Jardine (in the Chair)**: Order. Was there a question?

**Leigh Ingham**: Sorry; does my hon. Friend agree?

**Andrew Pakes**: I agree 100% with my hon. Friend. As we have discussed previously, we both want to make sure that jobs in theatre, the arts and creative industries are open to young people in our constituencies and across the country.

We were the first country to pass a national apprenticeship Act when the Tudor Parliament enacted the Statute of Artificers in 1563. It is mind-boggling to think how much our society and economy have changed since then. What has not changed is the timeless requirement of educating the next generation, and ensuring that novices in the jobs market are set forth in the working world with all the pride and self-reliance of mastering a new occupation, profession or skill.

Over the past few years, there have been various reports into the status, scale and success of apprenticeships. It is clear that the system is not working as it should be. In my view, it is a national disgrace that the number of apprenticeships fell under the last Government.

**Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate at the start of National Apprenticeships Week. Apprenticeships are particularly important in rural areas such as Glastonbury and Somerton, because they provide a valuable pathway for young people to gain practical skills and go on to secure employment in their local communities. That helps to combat rural depopulation and boost the local economy. There is a conflict, however, because although apprenticeships are good, the levy is not. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the apprenticeship levy should be scrapped?

**Christine Jardine (in the Chair)**: Order. Before the hon. Member responds, I remind Members that a lot of people want to get in on this debate, and we need to keep questions much shorter in order to do that.

**Andrew Pakes**: I agree with the hon. Lady. That is why I welcome the announcement in September last year by my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and Education Secretary of a new growth and skills levy to replace the existing apprenticeship levy, and include new foundation apprenticeships. That will give young people a route into careers where the nation has skills gaps.

It cannot be stated often or loudly enough that apprenticeships not only transform the lives of those who take them, but are vital to our economy and growth. Ministers' single, unifying, animating purpose is to get the economy growing, and I wholeheartedly endorse that.

**Michelle Scrogg** (Barrow and Furness) (Lab): Like me, my hon. Friend is a passionate advocate for apprenticeships, which play a huge role in Barrow and Furness and are vital for the workforce needed for the defence sector. BAE has an incredible 94% completion rate, whereas the national average is 51%. Does he agree that the Government's much-needed reforms are vital for improving access to good, skilled jobs in growing industries such as the defence sector. What thought has been given to improving the national completion rate?

**Andrew Pakes**: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. Before I came to Parliament, I was a union official at Prospect, which represents many workers in the defence sector and in Barrow, so I know full well the great expertise of apprentices in the defence sector. We need more of those apprenticeships for our national security and for new jobs.



[Andrew Pakes]

Growth will come because of a range of factors—we will secure inward investment and trade deals, shake up the planning system, boost infrastructure and back business—but a sure-fire way to stimulate growth is to invest in people's skills, energy and talent. Just yesterday, I met level 3 to level 7 KPMG apprentices from all parts of the country who work together to bring new opportunities. It was brilliant to hear from Gaby from Peterborough, who told her own story and gave lessons for how to ensure that more young people in Peterborough get the same opportunities. That means nothing short of a revolution in our system of apprenticeships.

I am proud that the previous Labour Government revitalised apprenticeships—the largest expansion in our history—and I welcome the cross-party support for innovation since then, including all-age apprenticeships and all-qualification approaches to workplace learning, but I am not satisfied. We need to address head-on why 900,000 young people across our country are not in education, employment or training; why young people cannot access the opportunities they need; and why the opportunities are not there in the first place. That matters in Peterborough, where we have seen falling apprenticeship numbers and rising levels of youth unemployment.

Last Friday, I was pleased to co-host a NEETs summit with Peterborough college, Anglia Ruskin University Peterborough and local businesses and providers to look at how we can make apprenticeships work better in my constituency. We need to put rocket boosters under the number of firms that take on apprentices, not for altruistic reasons but because it makes smart business sense. We also need reform to ensure that apprenticeship standards work for businesses and learners. I ask the Minister to remove the artificial barriers to success of academic English and maths, and move quickly to business-ready, work-ready, functional skills where they matter.

We are coming up to National Apprenticeship Week, and I want to address one other issue before I finish: not apprenticeships policy, but the cultural barriers. In too many parts of the UK, there is a hang-up about apprenticeships, and so many parts of the system are obsessed with university. Of course, we should value our world-class universities and celebrate the hard work of our university students. As a former president of the National Union of Students, of course I recognise the vital role that British universities play in our national story. However, apprenticeships should be seen as an equally valid alternative route, a legitimate way to gain skills and experience, and a vital contributor to our economic prosperity, and yet in public policy sometimes they are not. Why is that? I fear that there is still a snobbery about apprenticeships in the UK that is not found in competitor countries such as Germany and Sweden, which are more competitive. There is too often a lazy and misguided assumption that apprenticeships are second best to degrees, and that apprentices are lesser in comparison with undergraduates.

We often use the phrase, “University is not for everyone,” as though university is the gold standard and apprenticeships are the also-ran for second-class kids. The English class system exerts itself and places people into boxes, limiting horizons, prejudicing futures and

stifling ambitions. That must stop, not only for the good of the brilliant, energetic, ambitious young and not-so-young people who embark on apprenticeships, but for the economy and growth. We will not secure growth with one hand tied behind our back. Hardly any of the apprentices I have met say that their journey was made easier by careers support at school. That is why we need change in our careers service. We must make it easier for businesses to support learners and parents, and we need a step change in how we regard apprenticeships.

We are coming up to National Apprenticeship Week. Let us be loud and proud about apprenticeships. Let us challenge the stigma, call out the snobs, and put apprenticeships centre stage in our policy making, economic mission and national culture.

**Christine Jardine (in the Chair):** I remind Members to bob if they wish to be called in a debate. To get in all the speakers we have, please try to limit yourselves to three minutes. I call Peter Bedford—he is not here. Jim Shannon, please.

9.40 am

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** Thank you, Ms Jardine. I am always happy to be a substitute. I commend the hon. Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes) for securing the debate, and I spoke to him beforehand. There is a big crowd here because the subject is all-important to each and every one of us. I look forward to hearing the Minister's contribution, which I know will be positive.

Along with everyone here, I am a massive supporter of apprenticeships and the value they bring to the world of careers for young people. As I told the hon. Gentleman beforehand, I tabled an early-day motion about Northern Ireland apprenticeships two weeks ago. I see the good and the potential for apprentices across Northern Ireland. I am giving a Northern Ireland perspective to this debate to complement, echo and support the hon. Gentleman and everyone who speaks.

There are 13,000 apprentices across Northern Ireland, and it is great to be able to say that there are some incredible opportunities for young people in my constituency. Companies such as Thales and many car companies are brilliant at encouraging young people down the apprenticeship path. My right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) and I met representatives of Thales just before Christmas. I was impressed by the work the company is doing with apprenticeships. Apprentices get a good wage, which starts small and gives them encouragement to stay at it. As an example of what can be done, their student fees are paid by the company. Job suitability is about nothing more than having the desire and the work ethic to learn.

It is important to look at the range of stakeholders: local councils, employers, further education colleges, universities and others. The South Eastern Regional College in my constituency is brilliant at supporting young people through their educational journey. It is holding its spring awards ceremony in the terrace pavilion on Monday 3 March. I look forward to that, and to sharing its success.

In Northern Ireland, especially in my constituency and the Ards peninsula, we have a tradition of work in the construction sector. It is important that those in the sector have plenty of opportunities to advance—for some of them, to having their own businesses.

The Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland has set aside some £600,000 to increase apprenticeship participation among women, people with disabilities and individuals from disadvantaged areas. That will encourage collaboration between education, business and community sectors to develop innovative solutions for enhancing inclusivity in apprenticeships.

The theme for this year's Northern Ireland Apprenticeship Week is "Getting it Right for You", and that is we want to do for apprentices. Job creation is so important for sectors such as STEM, mechanics, aerospace and defence across the UK. There are endless opportunities, and we must do more to make our young people aware of them. Boys and girls, men and women can all take advantage of them. I am encouraged by the women in Northern Ireland who are looking for jobs in engineering. I look forward to the Minister's contribution and to doing all we can to support apprenticeship opportunities across the devolved nations.

9.43 am

**Alex McIntyre** (Gloucester) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes) for securing this important debate.

Apprenticeships matter. They matter because they break down the barriers to opportunity, giving residents in cities like Gloucester the skills that they need to succeed in life. This Government are committed to creating a fairer, more inclusive system that equips individuals with not only the skills that they need today, but the skills that we will all need in future.

We are introducing a youth guarantee, transforming further education colleges and fostering collaboration between businesses, training providers and Government to build a highly skilled workforce ready to support Labour's industrial strategy. I hope that in Gloucestershire we will take advantage of the devolution of adult skills funding, empowering local leaders to take charge of skills development in our area. Importantly, we will reform the apprenticeship levy, which has proven ineffective. In its place, the Government will introduce a flexible growth and skills levy, creating a fairer system that works for employers and learners in Gloucester.

**John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): When I spoke to an apprenticeships organisation in Rugby called Intec Business Colleges, it pointed out a deficiency of the previous apprenticeship levy: the threshold meant that it was mostly applicable to and attractive to larger companies. Sadly, that has meant that the small and medium-sized enterprise market has been significantly disadvantaged. Does my hon. Friend agree that as this Government reform the levy to be more effective, we must do everything we can to encourage SMEs to gain from apprentices, so young people can have more opportunities?

**Alex McIntyre**: I agree entirely. SMEs are the backbone of our business community. I recently met the Federation of Small Businesses in the south-west to discuss the opportunities in small and medium-sized businesses in Gloucester and across the region. As my hon. Friend says, apprenticeships are so important to those businesses, as is ensuring that the new levy is flexible so everyone can take part and every person in our country can benefit from the opportunities.

I recently met the principal of Gloucestershire College to discuss the opportunities and the vital role of FE colleges in helping young people to develop the skills that they need for the future, but challenges remain. Our higher and further education system is under significant strain. Many young people leave school without the skills or preparation that they need for the future. I will therefore be grateful if the Minister sets out the steps that the Government are taking to support FE colleges and work placements.

Apprenticeships are not just a pathway to employment. They are a key driver of opportunity for future generations. They provide people with the chance to gain valuable skills, earn while they learn and build fulfilling careers. By supporting people to gain skills in sectors such as technology, science, engineering, health and education, we are building a skilled workforce that will benefit individuals, businesses and the economy. The steps that this Government are taking will leave a lasting legacy of opportunity, ensuring a prosperous future and a workforce ready for the challenges ahead. This will lay the foundations for a stronger Britain, one in which the future is bright and Gloucester thrives.

9.47 am

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate; I commend the hon. Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes) for securing it, particularly ahead of National Apprenticeship Week next week. We in this place appreciate that apprenticeships play a crucial role in developing skills, supporting businesses and providing opportunities for young people to embark on meaningful careers.

I am proud of the progress that was made and am keen to see how it can continue. Between 2010 and 2024, the Conservative Government delivered 5.8 million apprenticeships, creating routes into 70% of occupations. In the last academic year alone, apprenticeship starts increased to 278,590, with 66% of those supported by the apprenticeship levy. Those figures highlight my party's commitment to ensuring that young people and adults alike have access to high-quality training that meets the demands of our economy. Since 2020, we have also seen the successful roll-out of T-levels, another innovative qualification that combines study with workplace experience.

Across my constituency, I have seen absolutely fantastic examples of apprenticeships making a real difference. Just last week, I met an apprentice called Stan at Surespan, a local access solutions business. It is a manufacturing business in Aldridge, but with global markets, and it is investing heavily in apprenticeships and technical training. In-Comm Training is another outstanding apprenticeship provider. Events such as the Brownhills jobcentre apprenticeship fair further demonstrate the enthusiasm and the need from both businesses and learners in supporting apprenticeships.

It is important that we ensure that apprenticeships remain of high quality and accessible and that they are offered as a career choice alongside university. Although local businesses across my constituency are actively creating apprenticeships, I ask the Minister to confirm that the focus will remain not just on quantity, but on the quality of apprenticeships.

[Wendy Morton]

I would also like to raise concerns about funding and accessibility for SMEs. That is really important, particularly with businesses feeling the impact of the increase in employer national insurance contributions—the jobs tax. We cannot just keep squeezing and squeezing small businesses. Without addressing that, we will not see increases in investment in employment and apprenticeship opportunities.

I could speak a lot longer on this topic—as hon. Members may have guessed, I am rather passionate about it—but I am conscious that the clock is ticking. Apprenticeships are a crucial pillar of our education and skills system. They provide young people with the opportunity to learn while they earn, to support businesses in finding the skilled workforce they need and to contribute to our nation's economy. Let us work together to make sure that there are more apprenticeships in future.

9.50 am

**Frank McNally** (Coatbridge and Bellshill) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes) on securing this important debate. I welcome the opportunity to recognise the importance of National Apprenticeship Week in the UK—although you and I will be celebrating Scottish Apprenticeship Week next month.

Prior to my election, I spent many years as the chair of education in North Lanarkshire, Scotland's second largest education authority. In an area in which one in four children are living in poverty, the route through education and entering positive pathways is critical. For many, that involves apprenticeships, which break down the barriers to opportunity. A successful apprenticeship journey works most effectively with the efforts of schools, further education, Government and employers.

During my time in office, I was pleased that we were able to operate the largest foundation apprenticeship programme in Scotland. Just last year, there were more than 2,000 modern apprenticeship starts in North Lanarkshire. However, in Coatbridge and Bellshill and across Scotland, despite the efforts of employers and learners, challenges remain. It beggars belief that despite the record settlement that the UK Government have given to Scotland, the Scottish Government's draft Budget includes a real-terms cut in apprenticeship funding. Colleges Scotland has warned that the Scottish Government's Budget for the next financial year will deliver a real-terms cut of 1.4% for the college sector, following a shocking 17% real-terms cut in recent years and the termination of more than 1,700 posts since 2020.

I have said on a number of occasions since the election that in Scotland and across the UK we need a skills revolution. That is the only way that we will transform our physical and digital infrastructure and deliver the well-paid jobs of the future. It is therefore not acceptable that the number of apprenticeship starts for 16 to 24-year-olds in Scotland has fallen by 5,800—a drop of 28%—in the past 10 years, according to analysis by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. Just last month, the chief executive of Scottish Engineering

highlighted the fact that one in five high-quality potential engineering apprenticeships have been lost this year because of a lack of funding.

It is right that the Labour Government are committed to fixing the mess left by the Tories with new apprenticeship reforms. It is critical that we get a Government in Scotland who have a similar laser focus.

9.53 am

**Shockat Adam** (Leicester South) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes); I have a business in Peterborough, and I concur with everything he said.

Let me begin by highlighting the remarkable return on investment that apprenticeships provide. I know from my time in Parliament that everything leads to the Treasury. Studies have shown that every £1 invested in level 2 and level 3 apprenticeship training will see a return of between £26 and £28. That is a big win not just for employers, but for apprentices.

For many individuals who do not thrive in traditional academic environments, apprenticeships are a lifeline. I lost so many friends, colleagues and peers who were brighter by far than I was, but who just did not fit into the conventional education system. If they had had an apprenticeship model they would have been really successful, but unfortunately they are now without work after so many decades. That is especially the case in unconventional areas like ours.

There are several challenges that employers and apprentices face. Among the most important is system complexity. For the employers I have spoken to, it is so complicated to employ apprentices. The system was meant to make things easier, but it has made things more complicated.

We need to concentrate on making the levy system a lot simpler for employers. We may need to revisit the tax treatment of self-funded training. Employer-funded training benefits from broad tax exemptions, while self-funded training does not enjoy the same advantages. To encourage greater training uptake among the self-employed and smaller businesses, we should align the tax relief for self-funded training and employer-funded training, levelling the playing field and incentivising skills development. We must also improve administrative support and reduce the regulatory complex. The decline in apprenticeship numbers and the overall reduction in training participation are not just statistics; they are signals that our current system is too complex and that both employers and apprentices are facing real, tangible challenges.

Before I conclude, I have a few questions for the Minister. How will the Government simplify the apprenticeship levy to ensure a uniform and effective subsidy rate for all employers, regardless of size? What measures will be introduced to ensure that public funding for adult education is increased and spent effectively to achieve outcomes? How do the Government plan to address the administrative burdens that discourage employers? Will the tax treatment of self-funded training be reviewed to create a level playing field for everybody?

9.56 am

**Baggy Shanker** (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough



(Andrew Pakes) for securing such an important debate as we approach National Apprenticeship Week. National Apprenticeship Week will bring us together to shine a spotlight on fantastic businesses and apprentices across our country, and rightly so.

Across the country, apprentices are building skills for life. They are also helping us to plug massive skill shortages across critical national infrastructure sectors as they train. One sector where we lack suitably qualified and experienced people and where apprenticeships are building skills for the future is the nuclear sector. Last week, I had the real pleasure of meeting and speaking to apprentices from Rolls-Royce, on which I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. These highly skilled, hard-working apprentices are based at Rolls-Royce's Raynesway site in Derby. They are designing propulsion plants that will power the next generation of AUKUS submarines and safeguard our national security for years to come. They should be proud of their work.

As much as I love speaking to the apprentices working in businesses across my constituency, I do not need to take their word for how valuable their experiences are. I myself know how valuable an apprenticeship can be and what a fulfilling career trajectory it can lead to, although I must say that when I first walked through the doors at Courtaulds to start my apprenticeship back in 1989, I would not have imagined ending up in this place. Having decided that A-levels did not feel right for me, I began a four-year broad craft apprenticeship. It allowed me to build my practical skills and attend college one day a week, before going on to specialise as an instrument and control mechanic.

I want every child in Derby and across the country to be educated about the amazing career opportunities that apprenticeships can offer. Our teenagers and young people must be able to make an informed choice about their next step, whether that is university or entering the workplace as an apprentice. The curriculum has an important role to play, and it is vital that we give every child a practical, hands-on learning experience. It is also important that students understand how such experiences might link to a range of vocational opportunities once they leave school.

I am pleased that the Labour Government have brought forward the curriculum and assessment review, which will ensure that children leave school ready to enter the workplace. As a former apprentice, I will always advocate for the huge value of apprenticeships. Apprenticeships are not second best. They are a fulfilling and exciting opportunity that our education system must support and reflect.

9.59 am

**Tony Vaughan** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes) for securing this vital debate.

I start by mentioning an injustice. It is not right, economically or morally, that so many young people who want to enjoy a vocational education have not benefited from the same opportunities as university students. In my constituency of Folkestone and Hythe there is incredible potential for a thriving apprenticeship system. My constituency has strengths in the creative industries, as well as in green energy and nuclear—we

are home to Little Cheyne Court wind farm and Dungeness nuclear power stations. But the potential for apprenticeships is untapped. Despite the significant number of regeneration projects in Folkestone and Hythe, the number of apprenticeship starts in construction, planning and the built environment fell by 49% in 2022-23 compared with the year before. Currently, there are 500 16 to 24-year-olds who are searching for work in Folkestone and Hythe but cannot find it. Apprenticeships have a critical role to play in supporting people to succeed in the workforce.

I want to celebrate East Kent college in Folkestone, which in 2023 was judged by Ofsted to be outstanding and offers an incredible array of qualifications, such as BTECs, T-levels and adult education, as well as a junior college. I also commend the work of large businesses locally such as EDF, as well as smaller local businesses such as Jenner and Park Farm Construction, which provide brilliant apprenticeships. But frustratingly, spending on training by businesses is at its lowest level since 2011. I want to speak directly to employers in Folkestone and Hythe: when you invest in apprenticeships, you invest in our young people; when you invest in our young people, you invest in our future and our community; and if you support the local community, it will give back to your businesses and support your success.

I believe that it is critical that part of Skills England's mandate will be to collaborate with the Migration Advisory Committee to ensure that we prioritise training of our young people before reaching to recruit from abroad. The Government's reforms will benefit many young people in Folkestone and Hythe who feel disenfranchised and believe that the 21st-century economy does not necessarily serve them. In many cases after deindustrialisation, where we gave them a pound shop in the place of a workshop, they may well be right.

I have some questions for the Minister on future policy development. I would welcome the publication of a timeline as to when we can expect the phased development of Skills England. How do the Government plan to align our industrial strategy, Invest 2035, with their apprenticeship strategy, and how can they use apprenticeships to reduce youth unemployment and long-term economic inactivity?

Much was made of Tony Blair's desire to see 50% of young people start university, but there are a lot of people, whether they have gone to university or not, who are ill-prepared for the 21st-century economy. We have had "education, education, education"; we now need apprenticeships, apprenticeships, apprenticeships.

10.2 am

**Alison Taylor** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes) for introducing this topic. I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I have had personal experience of the value of apprenticeships during my career and within my own family. My father, who became a fellow of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, completed an apprenticeship in the surveying department of a local authority rating department in the early 1960s. He came from a working-class family in Glasgow. That opportunity

[Alison Taylor]

was the making of him, and he went on to have a successful and enjoyable career. By the time I started the same career, the route to qualifying as a chartered surveyor began at university.

Today, firms such as global real-estate advisers Avison Young, where I worked, offer a range of apprenticeships: for town planners, surveyors and project managers; and across support functions, such as marketing, IT and human resources. I have come to understand the value of apprenticeships as a way to improve productivity. Apprentices who join the workforce from the age of 16 onwards in Scotland are able to earn and contribute while learning on the job and combining with study at college or university on day release.

Apprenticeships improve staff retention and loyalty. From an employer's point of view, they introduce fresh talent and promote diversity in the workplace. From an employee's point of view, apprenticeships present opportunities for some who otherwise may not have had the chance to combine on-the-job training with a degree-level qualification. Today, apprenticeships are available in a much wider range of career paths than ever before. I strongly encourage employers and young people in my constituency of Paisley and Renfrewshire North to consider the apprenticeship route to work. If they do, they will find that West College Scotland does an outstanding job of supporting learners and employers across my constituency to develop the skills that they need. I doubt that we can overstate the importance of apprenticeships, and I am pleased to be able to support National Apprenticeship Week.

10.5 am

**Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes) for securing this important debate. Bendalls Engineering in my constituency of Carlisle can trace its route back to 1894. Founded as a family-run business, Bendalls can lay claim to having manufactured the body parts of Donald Campbell's Bluebird cars and boats in the 1920s, and in the 1950s the company became one of the first suppliers of bespoke equipment to Britain's first nuclear facility. I was therefore delighted to learn that the latest chapter in Bendalls's history of innovation is to be an on-site skills academy managed by Lakes college.

My constituency brims with companies like Bendalls—from international firms such as Pirelli, and locally headquartered companies like Grain broadband, to other family-founded business, including the haulier Wm Armstrong, industrial supplier Thomas Graham and agricultural machinery provider Rickerby. All are committed to building a pipeline of talent through their apprenticeship programmes, which is complemented by the excellent array of apprenticeship programmes offered by Carlisle college.

In geographically remote places such as my constituency, with low inward migration and an ageing population, these apprenticeship schemes are the lifeblood of our local economy. What a shame then that, under the previous Government and in slight contrast to the rosy picture painted by the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), fewer and fewer people

embarked on apprenticeships. Indeed, between the introduction of the apprenticeship levy in 2017 and 2023, apprenticeships fell by 31%, while the number of skilled job vacancies more than doubled.

**Wendy Morton:** I set out my case during my speech, but since the hon. Lady is so passionate about apprenticeships, perhaps she can explain how the Government's interest in employer national insurance will help with the creation of more apprenticeships. They cannot simply keep pushing and pushing business, and squeezing their profit margins, and expect them to be able to invest in employment opportunities and training.

**Ms Minns:** I thank the right hon. Member for that intervention. We are having a debate on apprenticeships, and the fact that I put forward is that, under the last Government, they fell by 31%. I think it would be welcome if Opposition Members started to own their record in government. This Government, by contrast, are committed to making apprenticeships work for employers, apprentices and our country, closing regional growth gaps, targeting the skilled jobs that the country is crying out for and giving businesses like Bendalls more flexibility on the courses that are funded.

10.8 am

**Joe Morris** (Hexham) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I am very proud to be speaking today about the value of apprenticeships and National Apprenticeships Week. I represent the largest constituency in England, so it will be unsurprising to my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes) and everyone else that I want to speak about apprenticeships in Northumberland and the north-east, as well as Callerton and Throckley, where young people typically have extreme difficulty in accessing apprenticeships.

I visited my old school on Friday and had the pleasure of speaking to the deputy head; we spoke about the issues that many of the students at Queen Elizabeth's High School still have in getting access to skilled employment after they leave school and vocational education. Simply put, for many people in the north-east who want to remain there, there are not enough jobs, particularly in Northumberland. One of the major failures of the previous Government is that young people had to leave Hexham to find their futures elsewhere. I do not wish to score political points on that issue; people's need to leave is a political reality. One of the things that I will judge myself by is whether people can make their homes and their lives in Northumberland.

Apprenticeship programmes are essential to increasing social mobility, pride in communities and, frankly, to combating some of the depopulation in my part of the world. As I have said before in this Chamber and in the main Chamber, I represent the place where I grew up but unfortunately I am much more likely to bump into the parents and grandparents of my former schoolmates in the street than I am to bump into my former schoolmates themselves. That is a tragedy and a shame.

We need to ensure that local businesses are able to benefit from flexibility. I spent a couple of years working in the steel sector, where I saw highly sought-after apprenticeships that were much more competitive than

Oxford and Cambridge. However, we have an apprenticeship regime that is designed for multinational companies; it is not designed for industries that are far smaller, or for businesses such as Brocksbushes Farm Shop, which I visited a couple of weeks ago. I had an incredibly productive conversation there about the challenges it faces. It wants to offer more young people employment and more upskilling. It is held back not just by inflexibility in the current regime—and I urge the Government to look at that, and at how they can work with rural and small businesses to make the apprenticeship scheme work better for them—but by poor transport links. One of things that would make a major difference to the farm shop is simply having a bus stop slightly nearer to its premises. That would massively increase the ability of young people to get out there and to get the skills they need, while earning an income.

As I come to the end of my speech, I urge the Minister to seriously consider how we can improve apprenticeships—not just in major urban centres and in areas with good transport links, but in areas with poor transport links. That is because transport infrastructure is a key part of how we improve the issue.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Christine Jardine (in the Chair):** Order. Given the number of speakers, we will now have to move to two minutes per speech, unfortunately.

10.11 am

**Terry Jermy** (South West Norfolk) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes) on securing this debate. It is heartening to see so many Members here talking about this important subject, although they seem rather weighted on one side of the room.

I was keen to contribute to the debate because in rural areas such as my South West Norfolk constituency, apprenticeships are crucial. They offer a way into many industries in rural communities, including land management, farming, planning services, engineering, energy and nature conservation. So often, I talk to businesses in my constituency that struggle to recruit. They cannot find the people with the right skills, and as a result, their businesses often suffer. Apprenticeships are an important tool for addressing that challenge.

One business in my constituency that has been successfully leading the way on apprenticeships is Warren Services in Thetford, under the direction of Richard Bridgman and his son Will. Warren Services is an engineering firm with a proud track record of more than 30 years. To its credit, Warren is committed to building the workforce of the future, and it routinely goes to schools, academies and colleges to inspire young people to pursue a career in engineering and manufacturing. It regularly hosts recruitment days; there is one coming up next week, on 13 February. I do not normally advocate for second jobs, but if anyone wants a level 2 apprenticeship, they are available next week.

I am delighted that this Labour Government are doing more to support firms such as Warren and making apprenticeships a key part of their employment offer. In particular, I welcome the focus on green skills and the

green skills gap in this country. Building a workforce with the skills needed to transition to a greener society is crucial to tackling the climate and nature crisis.

10.13 am

**Jodie Gosling** (Nuneaton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Jardine. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes), who secured this debate.

Too many of our children are out of school and education, and they are leaving school ill-equipped for the world of work. Apprenticeships are a vital tool to help people attain hands-on skills while earning, without the financial repercussions of university or college life. They provide the specific, tailored skills that our local economies need to grow. For many of our young people—especially those who did not fit into the school system—apprenticeships are also a second chance.

I recently had the pleasure of meeting a group of students in Asda's supported internship programme. It was particularly noteworthy because those children had significant learning difficulties. The internship has given them a supported way into the workplace to gain the skills that they need to thrive, and they have worked incredibly hard to develop their skills significantly. I was struck by how well integrated they were in their workplace and with their colleagues, and by the pride their tutors took in their increased confidence. That is especially important, because disabled people are twice as unlikely to find employment.

Finding a job early, and grounding it in skills and development, transforms the lives of young people in Nuneaton and throughout the United Kingdom. Our rich and diverse bedrock of small businesses and microbusinesses in Nuneaton find it more and more challenging to access apprenticeships. That is one of the reasons why the number of apprenticeships in Nuneaton halved between 2018 and 2023. We have been working alongside umbrella bodies to remove some of the barriers that trade and small businesses face in entering into apprenticeships, and we would very much welcome more investment to remove those barriers.

10.16 am

**Andy MacNae** (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes) for securing this important debate. In the interest of time, I will focus on one issue: the awareness of apprenticeship opportunities, particularly among school leavers.

When I go around my Rossendale and Darwen constituency, I am inspired by the range of opportunities that our great businesses offer, but at the same time, a lack of skills and the inability to recruit the people they need remain key barriers to growth. I go into schools and talk to young people, and their awareness of the opportunities available to them remains remarkably low. That is reflected in the take-up of apprenticeships: only 25% are taken up by school leavers—around 80,000 students in 2023, compared with over 300,000 who applied for universities—and take-up was dominated by two sectors, which leaves many areas completely under-represented. It is also reflected in surveys: although 70% of parents would recommend an apprenticeship to their child, only one in 10 would be confident in supporting



[*Andy MacNae*]

them through the application process, compared with four in 10 for university applications, and 82% of teachers said that they felt confident talking about university opportunities, compared with just 27% for apprenticeships.

That is a fundamental issue. Indeed, the National Foundation for Educational Research found that the principal barrier to young people accessing apprenticeships was

“a lack of in-depth understanding of apprenticeships amongst young people, their parents/carers, and teachers, including the opportunities for career progression. This is preventing young people from even getting to the point of application.”

I have some questions for the Minister. To what degree are we assessing the impact of the enhanced Baker clause? What more can we do to enhance awareness among schools, businesses and others? To what degree should we consider destination measures—what students' education leads to, rather than the qualifications they get—in Ofsted judgments?

10.18 am

**Pam Cox** (Colchester) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes) for securing this debate as we approach National Apprenticeship Week.

We are fortunate in my Colchester constituency to have a diverse range of apprenticeship opportunities—from healthcare roles at Colchester hospital and in other parts of the NHS, to retail law and engineering—many of which are offered via the Colchester Institute university centre. Data from the Department for Education shows that there were 370 apprenticeship starts in Colchester in 2023-24, with over 1,400 people participating. Those numbers are good, but they are not great; we really need to raise them in Colchester and across Essex.

Unfortunately, there has been a fall in the take-up of intermediate-level qualifications—a reduction of nearly 50%, as I understand it—in the past five years. That must be addressed, because apprenticeships often give people a vital entry into the workforce. I encourage the Minister to consider how we can support intermediate and high-level apprenticeships in the near future, and to give employers and universities maximum flexibility in tailoring a new apprenticeship offer for new times.

10.19 am

**Mr Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes) for securing this debate.

It is great to see that the debate is so well attended, and it is clear that we could have had three times as long and still filled the time. Reflecting on some of the things we have heard, I believe that the previous Government had a commitment to apprenticeships, but they did not have any kind of systemic approach. There is a huge raft of different initiatives, but we do not have a proper skills system in this country. We have several different qualifications that do not coherently work together, which is why we see a very low completion rate. Many people complete their course but do not need the qualification to get the job. The previous Government focused on T-levels, through which apprenticeships cannot

be done. We really need the Government and Skills England—as it is being created—to put that whole raft of different initiatives into a constructive system.

There have been a lot of contributions about promoting the value of apprenticeships to young people; what we actually find is that when those major companies bring forward their apprenticeship schemes, there is no lack of people applying for them—there are 200 people for every job. We need to make apprenticeships more attractive to businesses, particularly SMEs. We have a system entirely designed around the BAEs and the Rolls-Royces of this world, but we need to reflect the reality of the economy, which, in many of our towns, is mainly those small businesses that are completely excluded from the system.

When the Minister gets to her feet, I hope she can say a lot more about when the Government will bring the growth and skills levy forward, what the role of Skills England will be, and how we will end up with a more systemic approach to capitalise on the huge interest in this subject to ensure we make real progress.

10.21 am

**Adam Thompson** (Erewash) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes) for securing this debate ahead of National Apprenticeship Week.

I am a great advocate of the apprenticeship system. This time last year I was employed at the University of Nottingham, teaching degree-level apprenticeships in electromechanical engineering. Degree-level apprenticeship courses strongly complement a traditional format of degree-level education and powerfully support the Government's skills agenda.

I want to focus specifically on degree-level apprenticeships and their unique offering. The course I helped deliver at Nottingham was a new paradigm in degree delivery. When people picture a degree in mechanical engineering, they could be forgiven for thinking of an aged lecturer—often male and white—delivering a sermon on gear ratios or some such nonsense to a half-empty, oak-panelled lecture hall, with his students often more taken by the declining state of repair of his ochre elbow patches than the content of his lectures. However, that image could not be further from the course that my colleagues and I were delivering last year. In a degree-level apprenticeship, content is commonly provided asynchronously via recordings and digital exercises, in a manner significantly more engaging than otherwise might be possible in a traditionally delivered degree.

When I was in my previous employment, I often joked that my role was closer to a professional Youtuber than that of a traditional lecturer, with my days spent recording and editing 15 to 20-minute videos in a bite-sized, easily digestible format. I want more degree-level apprenticeships to be offered to allow more people to access the knowledge and experience those courses offer. I want to see people thrive with a new skills offering, and to reverse the decline in apprenticeships that happened under the previous Government.

This Friday, I will visit JTL Training in Sandiacre in my constituency, a training facility which supports career development and business growth and offers apprenticeships and traineeships in building services engineering. I am

looking forward to meeting the apprentices on Friday, to talk to them about exactly how we can support their growth, and the growth of our nation.

10.24 am

**Nesil Caliskan** (Barking) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Jardine.

The families and young people in Barking and Dagenham are not short of aspiration or willingness to work hard, but the lack of opportunities means that a staggering 46% of 19-year-olds there lack qualifications, the second worst statistic in London. The statistics do not much improve as young adults get older, as 22% of the residents in the area that I represent have no qualifications at all. Of course, behind every such statistic is a person, a life and wasted potential.

Unemployment caused by a skills gap also holds us back as a country. In Barking and Dagenham, economic inactivity is 25% higher than the London average, so this topic really matters to my constituents. The truth is that many of the people who I represent want to work, but the skills programmes and apprenticeship opportunities are simply not there. Indeed, the national apprenticeship levy is a system that is broken, which I know all too well because I led a local authority before coming to this place.

That is why I welcome the Government's announcement to establish Skills England. I would also welcome the Minister giving more details on the timeline for that body, because the skills and apprenticeship challenge is a national one. Compared with those of other OECD countries, the UK workforce are under-qualified, primarily because this country has a much lower uptake of technical training in comparison with other levels of study, for reasons that my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes) outlined.

Consequently, a national commitment to a comprehensive apprenticeship scheme is important. It should include small and medium-sized enterprises, such as those in my constituency, because I frequently meet apprentices who tell me that the additional support they receive from smaller employers or microbusinesses is outstanding.

It is important to link a skills agenda to an industrial strategy, which has been lacking for the past 14 years. Without a comprehensive industrial strategy and a skills agenda that sit side by side, we will set ourselves up for failure, so I welcome the Government's commitment on both those plans.

10.26 am

**Alistair Strathern** (Hitchin) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine.

I welcome the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes). He has not just secured this debate, but shown leadership on this issue long before he became an MP.

Apprenticeships matter to me, and not just because I have seen at first hand the impact they can have on young people's lives. I also recognise that they are crucial for delivering on this Government's agenda. We will not have the construction skills needed to get Britain building again, from key infrastructure to affordable housing, without action on apprenticeships; our workforce will not have the skills they need to seize the benefits

of the green transition, from retrofitting to green manufacturing, without action on apprenticeships; and, crucially for me, we will not live up to our aspiration to be less agnostic about the type of growth, the type of jobs and who benefits from them for the first time in a long time in this country without action on apprenticeships.

I am lucky to have some fantastic businesses and training providers in my constituency, and to have had not one, but two Secretaries of State visit them with me. First, the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology came to visit Cadent, to see the incredible pride that its apprenticeships took in the skills they were learning at their training centre in Hitchin. Secondly, the Secretary of State for Education came to see the fantastic charity Amazing Apprenticeships, founded by Hitchin resident Anna Morrison CBE, which agitates for better action and ambition around apprenticeships, and supports more young people to access them, not just locally but across the country.

When I speak to those apprentices, it is clear that they have huge pride in their work and in the opportunities available to them. What is also clear is the greater optimism they now have for their own futures as a result of their apprenticeships. That is an optimism that I want more people in my constituency to have.

From speaking to employers and to Anna Morrison, it is clear that there is more we can do, from making sure that we improve functional skills, to ensure that employers have confidence in them and more young people can access them, to making sure that as we expand the huge opportunity that foundation apprenticeships can provide, we also support more employers and particularly more SMEs to offer them, so that they can truly be a stepping-stone for more young people into apprenticeships. We must also ensure that we build on the greater awareness that young people now have of apprenticeships and turn that into a greater number of apprenticeship starts. Heartbreakingly, that number declined under the last Government. Young people deserve a lot better and I look forward to working with the Minister to make sure they get it.

10.28 am

**Leigh Ingham** (Stafford) (Lab): I welcome today's debate and its focus on apprenticeships, which is so important.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes) suggested earlier, apprenticeships and the narratives around them have changed a lot in recent years. When I was younger, apprenticeships were seen as something that working-class kids did. They were not considered academic or necessarily broad. They were in traditional trades, such as hairdressing, plumbing, building or being an electrician. Actually, my dad did one, completing the training to be a bricklayer.

However, the situation is quite different now. People can do an apprenticeship in anything, from computer science to law to being a chef or a pilot. They are not just for people fresh out of college or high school. Many apprentices in my constituency of Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages are older than 25 and the majority of the apprenticeships undertaken are advanced qualifications.

Our policies must reflect those shifts, which is why I welcome Skills England's work in driving forward national skills development and transforming opportunities for young people and those switching careers.

[Leigh Ingham]

Apprenticeships do not just provide education, but are a powerful tool for economic growth, as many hon. Members have said, particularly in towns. I regularly meet representatives of Newcastle and Stafford Colleges Group, the outstanding college in my constituency, which collaborates with more than 700 employers from small businesses to multinational corporations. Its success in securing apprenticeships highlights the vital role that apprenticeships play in bridging skills gaps and strengthening our workforce.

I am also glad that Skills England is committed to working across industry with employees and other key organisations to refine its assessments of the UK's skills needs. We must be laser focused on skills shortages, particularly in SMEs, while ensuring that apprenticeships work for businesses and the people taking them. I believe Skills England's review will hold the answers we need. I look forward to the Minister telling us where the Government are with that and the timeline for that process.

10.30 am

**Antonia Bance** (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes) for securing the debate. I am a proud manufacturing MP from the Black Country. I represent Tipton, Wednesbury and Coseley, where manufacturing still makes up 25% of the jobs available, but we have two and a half times the national average of people with no qualifications.

I want to make three points. First, I want our skills strategy to prioritise manufacturing, engineering and construction in line with the industrial strategy. We do not want to see welding, bricklaying and retrofitting on the Migration Advisory Committee's shortage occupation list, because we want to grow our own. We want to build 1.5 million new homes with new construction workers brought in through construction apprenticeships. That is why I am so worried about the fact that there were only 24,000 construction apprenticeship starts last year.

Secondly, I want us to prioritise level 3 and 4 apprenticeships, because that is where the wages premium really is. Just 17% of people in my constituency have level 4 skills, but 40% of the jobs on offer need those skills.

Finally, the mandatory grade 4 English and maths at GCSE continues to be a barrier to young people accessing apprenticeships in my constituency. The perpetual resits are so dispiriting. I bow to no one in my belief that working-class kids need qualifications, but there has to be a better way. I hope the Minister has some answers for me.

**Lauren Edwards** (Rochester and Strood) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Christine Jardine (in the Chair)**: Order. We are out of time. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, Max Wilkinson.

10.32 am

**Max Wilkinson** (Cheltenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I congratulate the hon. Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes) on securing the debate.

Apprenticeships are a vital part of our education system, and the Liberal Democrats think there should be more of them. They break down barriers to opportunity and offer young people a chance to learn while earning through vocational placements. However, after years of Conservative failure, the system is badly struggling and is failing to attract the number of young people it should.

**Mr Perkins**: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for saying that the Liberal Democrats believe that there should be more apprenticeships. One of his colleagues said that the apprenticeship levy should be abolished. Can he clarify whether that is Liberal Democrat policy? If so, how does he intend to fund the extra apprenticeships that he wants?

**Max Wilkinson**: I will move on to that, and the hon. Gentleman will find that there is a pleasing consensus between my party and his.

There are positive stories around, and I will highlight an example of good practice from Cheltenham. The hon. Member for Gloucester (Alex McIntyre) mentioned Gloscol, which has one of the most influential, if not the most influential, cyber-clusters outside London. The 5,000 members in CyNam work closely with academia and the education sector to build the skills that drive growth. Gloucestershire college is helping to equip the cyber-security professionals of tomorrow with the skills they need via a range of digital and cyber apprenticeships, in both Cheltenham and Gloucester. Apprentices at Gloscol benefit from being at the heart of Cheltenham's cyber-security community, close to GCHQ and the Golden Valley development, alongside experienced professionals based in co-working spaces on site. The cyber degree apprenticeship is endorsed by the National Cyber Security Centre and is offered in partnership with the University of the West of England. It gives young people a route into a huge growth sector, helps our economy to thrive locally and nationally, and makes our nation safer too. The college is also offering courses at its new £5.2 million sustainable construction centre. The hon. Member for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy) mentioned green skills earlier. We are equipping young people with the skills needed to deliver the built environment we need for the future.

Those are just two examples from Gloucestershire college, which is ably led by its visionary principal, Matthew Burgess. It is a local success story of which I and the hon. Member for Gloucester are rightly proud, and it shows that offering apprenticeships should be a much bigger priority for this country.

**Gideon Amos** (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): Another key development site, similar to the projects my hon. Friend has mentioned, is Tata's Agratas gigafactory near Taunton. It is important that colleges can set up apprenticeships and skills training in advance of the factory being built. Does my hon. Friend support a request to the Minister to facilitate that?

**Max Wilkinson**: Of course. An alignment of skills with the jobs need for the future is key in the apprenticeship sector. Flawed policy in the past means that there has been a clear drop-off in new apprentices in recent years. Just over 736,000 apprentices participated in an



apprenticeship in the last academic year, which is a slight decrease of 2.1% on the previous reporting period. Apprenticeship starts overall have fallen by 170,000 since 2015-16, when the Conservatives started governing alone. The deal on offer is clearly not as attractive as it once was.

We need to recognise that apprentices have the same rights as other employees, but experience a large pay disparity compared with other workers. The national minimum wage will be £11.44 for those aged 21 and over, but for a first-year apprentice, the rate is much lower. Young people are not immune from the cost of living crisis and the disparity between those two wages might be a disincentive. Have Ministers considered whether it is and whether it might be putting young people off from taking up apprenticeships?

The Liberal Democrats would scrap the apprentice rate and instead pay apprentices more fairly. We must also reform the apprenticeship levy, which many Members have mentioned today. Employers tell us that it simply does not work and the House of Commons Library briefing shows that there are large underspends every single year. The amount of money being put aside to train young people is simply not being spent. The Association of Employment and Learning Providers says that the money is being raised for skills but not spent on skills, at a time when Governments—this one and the last—say they are keen to encourage businesses to invest in skills.

The Lib Dems would replace the broken apprenticeship levy with a broader and more flexible skills and training levy. We are pleased to hear that the Government want to abolish the apprenticeship levy and replace it with a new growth and skills levy under Skills England. That is a positive step. However, it is clear that there is still work to be done in establishing the new levy and Skills England to oversee it. I would appreciate an update from the Minister on where things are with that policy.

There is also a concern that careers advice systems are not being properly set up to advise people of the many opportunities in apprenticeships. If we are going to fill the skills gaps that we have discussed, alignment of careers advice with those gaps will be key.

We Liberal Democrats believe that apprenticeships have a much bigger role to play. We welcome the Government's plan for changing the system. If we get the reform right, we will help young people and employers, too. Central to that will be finally getting rid of the failed apprenticeship levy, properly valuing apprenticeships and learning from best practice like that in my constituency and that of my neighbour in Gloucester.

**Christine Jardine (in the Chair):** I call the Opposition spokesperson, Rebecca Paul.

10.38 am

**Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Jardine, and to respond today for the first time for His Majesty's Opposition. I congratulate the hon. Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes) on securing this debate on the value of apprenticeships and National Apprenticeships Week.

We have heard some tremendously insightful points this morning and, like others, I thank all Members for their contributions. I think it is apparent that everyone who has spoken today recognises the inherent merit of

apprenticeships and it was we in the Conservative party who acted to deliver a world-class apprenticeship system that has created opportunities for countless young people, which would otherwise have remained out of reach, allowing them to earn while they learn.

Since 2010, there have been more than 5.8 million apprenticeship starts, with 736,500 people participating in an apprenticeship in England in the 2023-24 academic year alone. The numbers are impressive, but what truly makes the system we put in place one of the most laudable in the world is the sheer diversity of occupations that have been opened up to our young people. In England today, the apprenticeship system reaches into nearly 700 different occupations—everything from finance to agriculture to construction to nuclear physics. That means that today it is more viable than ever before for young people to chart their own paths and take those vital first steps into the careers that they have been dreaming of.

Of course, a robust apprenticeship scheme offering access to qualifications ranging from level 2 through to master's degrees at level 7 cannot be delivered on the cheap. That is why successive Conservative Governments always sought to fund apprenticeships properly. In our final year in office, we delivered £2.7 billion for apprenticeships. As Members will appreciate, even the most excellent apprenticeship schemes are of little use without the anticipated uptake. That is why, when in government, we set out to cut red tape for businesses offering apprenticeships. We fully funded young people up to the age of 21 undertaking apprenticeships in small businesses, increased the amount of money apprenticeship levy payers could give to SMEs to hire an apprentice and put all apprenticeships on UCAS so that young people can compare apprenticeships in the same way they would a university degree.

**Pam Cox:** Will the hon. Member give way?

**Rebecca Paul:** I am sorry; I will need to make progress so that the Minister has sufficient time.

Crucially, it was a Conservative Government that brought the Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022 into law, ensuring that all pupils now meet providers of technical education so that they understand the wide range of career routes and training available to them, such as apprenticeships, T-levels or traineeships—not just the traditional academic options.

I know that Members will have their own accounts of how this fantastic system is working to nurture and support young people in their constituencies, and we have heard many of them today. I could not miss the opportunity presented by the debate to highlight one of my own. I was recently fortunate enough to visit the UK headquarters of Toyota, located in Burgh Heath, in the Reigate constituency. The visit included the chance to meet and hear from some of the outstanding apprentices working at the company. I was struck by the truly impressive enthusiasm, intelligence and dedication of these young workers. Though still in the early stages of their careers, the apprentices were already making hugely valuable contributions across departments from engineering to finance to marketing. In return, they received experience and training that I have no doubt will leave them in excellent standing for the duration of their working lives. That is an example of apprenticeships done right—an exemplar of what Conservative Governments have been working to enable and support for the last 14 years.

[Rebecca Paul]

It is of real concern that today the very framework that made these apprenticeships, and so many others like them, possible now appears to be in some jeopardy. That jeopardy arises from a Government commitment to replace the apprenticeship levy with a growth and skills levy that will allow firms to spend up to 50% of their levy contributions on non-apprenticeship related training. If we make the plausible assumption that businesses will take maximum advantage of that flexibility, the number of apprenticeships on offer could slump from about 350,000 to just 140,000, a 60% decrease.

Of particular concern is that the worst of the impact would be felt by our youngest workers at the very first stages of their careers. If we again assume the full 50% decrease in spending, the number of apprenticeships available to those under the age of 19 would crash to below 40,000. That would be a drop from 106,000 in 2017. I concede that the Government's intended approach might make some degree of sense if a significant portion of the apprenticeship levy remained unspent and would otherwise be serving no useful purpose. However, this is simply not the case. A full 98% of the apprenticeship budget has been used up over the last two years. That funding has gone to support high-quality, career-boosting apprenticeships of the sort we have been discussing this morning. It is concerning that this commitment risks seeing apprenticeship funding diffuse out into lower value courses, or even seminars and programmes that employers would have offered anyway. That is clearly not in the best interests of our young people, and risks creating a cohort with markedly worse life chances than that which came before.

It may well be the case that the Government intend to have their cake and eat it. It would be possible to both allow firms the flexibility to spend 50% of their levy contributions elsewhere and to maintain the current number of apprenticeships, but that could only be achieved with additional Government spending. To maintain the number of apprenticeship starts at the current level—assuming the 50% flexibility on levy spending—the Government would be forced to invest an additional £1.5 billion of new funding.

I ask the Minister to provide clarity on the Government's intentions. Will firms be given 50% discretion to divert funding away from apprenticeships, as was previously announced? If so, will the Government step in with fresh investment to maintain numbers or will they allow our dynamic apprenticeship system to wither? If Ministers intend to intercede, where will the £1.5 billion they need be found? I pose those important questions not to score political points, but because we derive enormous value in this country from the transformative effect of apprenticeships and want to see as many young people benefit from them as possible.

With one eye on the clock to ensure the Minister has sufficient time to respond, I will say a brief word on defence. As of November 2023, the Ministry of Defence was the largest single deliverer of apprenticeships in the UK, with over 22,000 personnel engaged on a nationally recognised apprenticeship programme at any one time. In addition, over 95% of our non-commissioned military recruits are offered an apprenticeship after their trade training. That includes schemes with focuses on digital, nuclear, analytics and much more. Apprenticeships are a thread that runs through our armed forces, the Ministry

of Defence and those private sector organisations that support both. It is of great importance that in their rush to redefine the way apprenticeships are delivered in this country the Government do not deprive our armed forces of the much-needed talent and capacity that is now nurtured and developed through apprenticeship schemes.

I have left the Minister much to address, so will now end where I began, by congratulating the hon. Member for Peterborough on providing us with this valuable opportunity to express our support for, and commitment to, apprenticeships. I wish everyone participating from 10 February a successful National Apprenticeship Week.

10.45 am

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby):** It is a privilege to speak with you as Chair, Ms Jardine. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes) on securing a debate on this subject and on his thoughtful speech. Whether in debates like today, or in his role as co-chair of the APPG on apprenticeships, he is an excellent ambassador for apprenticeships. I appreciate his enthusiasm and drive, and I was extremely impressed to hear that he has visited over 100 businesses since being a Member of Parliament.

As we have heard, I have a good many questions to respond to and I will endeavour to do my best. It is refreshing to hear from the many Members on the Government Benches about their grassroots experiences; there are those who have held jobs, been apprentices and are well connected to their communities, and we appreciate them all.

I want to set the record straight when it comes to what the Government have inherited. As well as inheriting the £22 billion black hole, we also inherited the fact that one in eight 16 to 24-year-olds are not in education, employment or training. Indeed, UK employers have said to us that a third of vacancies are due to skills shortages under the previous Government. Technical training at level 4 and 5 in the UK is at only 4% of adults, compared to Germany at 20% and Canada at 34%. What we have inherited is absolutely staggering. This is a Government for change—we are investing in our people and their future careers, and I will continue to speak about these issues.

I acknowledge everybody who has spoken: my hon. Friends the Members for Stafford (Leigh Ingham), for Barrow and Furness (Michelle Scrogham), for Gloucester (Alex McIntyre), for Rugby (John Slinger) for Coatbridge and Bellshill (Frank McNally), for Leicester South (Shokat Adam), for Derby South (Baggy Shanker), for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Alison Taylor), for Carlisle (Ms Minns), for Hexham (Joe Morris), for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy), for Nuneaton (Jodie Gosling), for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae), for Colchester (Pam Cox), for Erewash (Adam Thompson), for Barking (Nesil Caliskan), for Hitchin (Alistair Strathern), and for Tipton and Wednesbury (Antonia Bance), as well as my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan), the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), and the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke), for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) and for Reigate (Rebecca Paul). I thank them all for their contributions.

National Apprenticeship Week promises to be the best yet, with more than 1,000 events across the country showcasing all that apprenticeships have to offer, as well as the wonderful apprentices taking to social media, including Instagram, to share their stories to inspire the apprentices of tomorrow. I thank all the apprentices, employers and providers who have worked so hard to provide these opportunities and to make apprenticeships such a success.

We know that right now the system is not working for far too many young people who have the most to gain from apprenticeships, but who have too often been locked out of accessing these opportunities. Apprenticeship starts by young people under 25 fell by almost 40% between 2015-16 and 2023-24. We are committed to changing this and to rebalancing the system to support more young people. That is why we are introducing new foundation apprenticeships in targeted, growing sectors. These will give more young people a foot in the door at the start of their working lives, while supporting the pipeline of new talent that employers will need to drive economic growth. We are working closely with employers and providers to design these new offers and ensure that they have the opportunity to develop their infrastructure before training and assessment starts.

We also want to make sure that apprentice wages support the attraction of talented individuals into apprenticeships. We are increasing the apprenticeship minimum wage by 18% this April, from £6.40 to £7.55, which will boost the hourly rate for thousands of young apprentices across a range of sectors and those in their first year of an apprenticeship.

We will continue to support care leavers to undertake apprenticeships. Apprentices under the age of 25 who have been in local authority care can claim a bursary of £3,000 when they start an apprenticeship. We will continue to pay £1,000 to both employers and training providers to support them to take on apprentices aged under 19, or 19 to 24 if they have an education, health and care plan or have been in care. Employers are exempt from paying towards employees' national insurance for all apprentices aged up to 25 when the employee's wage is below £50,270 a year.

As we work to support more apprenticeship opportunities for young people, it is vital we make sure they are aware of these opportunities. We are promoting career starter apprenticeships, suitable for those leaving full-time education, and targeting young people through the Skills for Life campaign. We have committed to improving careers advice and guaranteeing two weeks of work experience for every young person, as well as to establishing a national jobs and careers service to support people into work and help them to get on at work.

We are also taking action to support employers who want to build the skilled workforce they need for long-term success but who have told us they have not been able to find the right training options. In recent years, UK employers have said that over a third of their vacancies were down to skill shortages. That is why, as a key step of our levy-funded growth and skills offer, we will be introducing shorter duration apprenticeships. These will allow employers to benefit from high-quality apprenticeship training for valuable, in-demand roles that need less than 12 months' training to be fully occupationally competent, offering more flexibility where that is right for the employer and the learner. We will continue to listen to employers as we deliver the greater flexibility

they have called for, and to work with them as we build a vigorous and responsive skills system that will support employers to fill skills gaps that are holding back our economy.

After the Conservatives left us with a collapsing apprenticeship system as well as skills shortages, Labour is listening to employers and redrawing the system through Skills England, a new growth and skills levy, and new foundation apprenticeships. Apprenticeship starts by young people under 25 fell by almost 40% between 2015-16 and 2023-24. The Government are focusing on establishing a coherent skills system, with more flexible training options that support employers to fill skills gaps by driving growth and spreading opportunity. We are introducing foundation apprenticeships to get young people into work-based training and employment, as well as delivering shorter duration apprenticeships to provide flexibility for employers and learners.

SMEs are incredibly important to the economy and to apprenticeships. They are more likely to employ younger apprentices and apprentices from disadvantaged areas. We pay 100% of the training costs for young apprentices aged 16 to 21 and for apprentices aged 22 to 24 who have an education, health and care plan or have been in local authority care where they have undertaken apprenticeships with SMEs. As I have mentioned, we also pay £1,000 to employers and providers for apprentices aged 16 to 18 and those aged 19 to 24 who have an EHCP. We will ensure that we consider the needs of the smaller employer as we develop our levy-funded growth and skills offer.

The Government's first mission is to kickstart economic growth. Across the country, skills gaps are holding back business growth, so we will support employers to invest in skills training. That brings me on to Skills England. We know that right now the skills system in England is complex. There is no shared national ambition on skills development. There is a need to bring together in one place a range of functions, currently scattered across different organisations, to better support the delivery of the skills that the economy needs and to further our industrial strategy, and growth and opportunity missions.

We are setting up Skills England to address these problems by bringing coherence and efficiency to the system, for the benefit of learners, businesses and local areas. Skills England will ensure that we know where our skills gaps are, and the training needed to fill them now and in the future. Skills England will combine the best available statistical data, with insights generated by employers and other key stakeholders. It will also ensure that there is a comprehensive suite of apprenticeships, training and technical qualifications that are aligned with skills gaps and the needs of employers.

The first Skills England report highlighted employer demand for levels 4 and 5—high technical qualifications; those qualifications have been independently approved as providing the skills that employers need. Skills England will work closely with employers, providers, trade unions, Government Departments, combined authorities, regional bodies and other agencies, all of which will help deliver our mission to drive economic growth and to open up a world of opportunity for young people and adults. The Government have an ambitious plan to rebuild Britain. We will deliver 1.5 million homes in England in this Parliament. Around 5,000 more construction apprenticeship



[Janet Daby]

places will be made available per year by 2027-28, thanks to an £140 million industry investment to get Britain building again.

We welcome Peterborough's commitment to breaking down barriers to opportunity by being part of one of eight youth trailblazers that will launch in April 2025. Peterborough and Cambridgeshire have just announced the formation of their youth forum to shape the youth guarantee, to ensure that the voices and perspectives of young people are included in decision making. That pilot will address the needs and challenges faced by the young people in that area. It was wonderful to hear from many MPs about the work in their constituencies. I thank everybody for championing the work that the Government are doing in this area.

**Jim Shannon:** On a point of order, Ms Jardine. The hon. Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes) has not wound up the debate.

**Christine Jardine (in the Chair):** We are out of time. The hon. Member indicated at the start that he did not mind.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the value of apprenticeships and National Apprenticeships Week.

## Six Nations Rugby Championship: Viewing Access

11 am

**Christine Jardine (in the Chair):** I will call Charlie Dewhirst to move the motion, and I will then call the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

**Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con):** I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential merits of free-to-view access for the Six Nations Rugby Championship in 2026 and beyond.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I am pleased to have secured this timely debate on the future of the Six Nations and its broadcast in the UK, as the championship's current deal with the BBC and ITV comes to an end after this tournament. For the record, I am a former employee of the Rugby Football Union, but I have not been an employee there since 2017. I am delighted to be joined today by colleagues from across the four home nations, but I assure hon. Members that I will not mention the results of the England or Wales games at the weekend—there is no need to dwell on those.

First, I will address the importance of the Six Nations to rugby union and the nation. It is one of the most popular annual sporting events, and over the weekend millions of people across the UK were watching at home, in the pub and at rugby clubs. It celebrates old rivalries between the home nations and inspires so many children to get involved in the game. It also fills a void in the sporting calendar during the cold and wet weekends in February and March, when not many other major events—or, indeed, anything else—are taking place.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I do not want to rub salt into the wound, but we had a magnificent game this Saturday and we enjoyed the victory; others will come—there are more to go. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing forward this debate, and he mentioned a factor that is critical for me and for most of us. Does he agree that UK buy-in at the Olympic games, and the national pride experienced, are partly due to the accessibility, which means that people can watch and become engaged? That is one way for us to inspire the next generation of boys and girls he referred to.

**Charlie Dewhirst:** I absolutely agree; the hon. Member makes a good point. I will come on in some detail to the importance of the tournament's accessibility and how it inspires the next generation of fans and players. I also note that the match at the weekend was really excellent for at least 40 minutes, but we will leave it there.

The tournament has a rich history. It was first played in 1883, as the Home Nations championship, among the four home nations of the United Kingdom. In 1910, the tournament became the Five Nations championship in 1910, with the addition of France. In 2000, it was expanded to become the Six Nations, when Italy was invited to join.

Over the years, the Five and then the Six Nations has provided many iconic moments. Would you believe, Ms Jardine, that I am just about old enough to remember the great Scottish grand slam-winning side of 1990? Who can forget what Gavin Henson did to us English in 2005? On the flipside, I was lucky enough to be at the Millennium stadium in 2017 when Elliot Daly scored that last-minute winner to break Welsh hearts. The tournament has made names such as Hastings, O'Driscoll, Warburton and Itoje household names. My fear is that any move away from free-to-air television could see audiences plummet and risk us missing out on the next generation of rugby players and fans.

**Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this really important debate. According to a recent study by CHoosing Active Role Models to INspire Girls, only 28% of 14-year-olds were able to identify a sporting role model. Does he agree that if the women's Six Nations follows the men's game and moves behind a paywall, it would limit girls' access to the sport, reduce visibility and ultimately harm efforts to grow women's participation in rugby?

**Charlie Dewhurst:** I absolutely agree. The women's rugby game has been a huge success story over the last decade, and the free-to-air coverage that we have of the women's Six Nations has been a key part of that. I pay tribute to all the clubs up and down the country that have done such a huge amount of work to get more girls and women into the game and to play it.

To go back to what I was saying about free-to-air access across the board, all current matches are shown on the BBC and ITV. That ensures that the sport has a vital window to the wider population; that is key to keeping it in the national spotlight. It is worth recalling that the last comprehensive free-to-air broadcast deal for test cricket was for the 2005 Ashes series—arguably the greatest of all time—but I question whether that rollercoaster summer of cricket would have grabbed the nation's attention in the same way had it not been accessible to all.

Since then, cricketing authorities have been battling for the survival of the test format; this is 20 years after it went behind a paywall. They have had to invent what I will call a new gimmick format for free-to-air television in an attempt to win over the next generation of fans. Thankfully, today's is not a debate about the pros and cons of the Hundred, so I will return to the matters in hand.

**Max Wilkinson** (Cheltenham) (LD): We could go on for hours on that.

**Charlie Dewhurst:** We could. Perhaps that is an opportunity for later in the year; we could return to Westminster Hall.

There were several reports in the media last week that a deal between the Six Nations and TNT Sports for coverage in 2026 and beyond was imminent. I am grateful to the Six Nations for providing me with clarification on that point, and I can confirm that those reports are inaccurate, as any deal has yet to go out to tender. That does, however, set the backdrop for today's debate, as it will be vital that any new deal maintains free-to-air coverage.

**Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for initiating this timely debate. Does he agree that the Six Nations needs to ensure that there is a balance between reach and revenue when entering into these conversations with broadcasters?

**Charlie Dewhurst:** I thank the hon. Member for that intervention, and the debate is very timely, given what I am about to say. I am also grateful for her contribution, given her role in Parliament as regards rugby and her previous role in the sport as well. I am very aware that income from broadcast deals is vital to the home nations' rugby unions, but I would caution against a dash to the highest bidder. This should be a case not of maximising income but of optimising it so that the sport continues to have a broad reach, which in turn creates more fans.

**Edward Morello** (West Dorset) (LD): I think the decision would run counter to the aim of increasing engagement in the sport. The hon. Member will know that the Rugby Football Union receives £28 million of taxpayers' money to not only deliver the women's rugby world cup but improve engagement in the women's game. However, is he aware that the joint venture between the rugby world cup and the RFU to deliver the tournament awarded the contract to provide the equipment to Rhino Rugby, a long-term RFU sponsor, which was paid £800,000 and selected ahead of Aramis Rugby, which offered to deliver all the equipment for free? I would question that. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government should do more to monitor how taxpayers' money is spent and whether that is being done in the interest of growing the game?

**Charlie Dewhurst:** I think we can all agree that we are looking forward to the women's world cup. I am not aware of the detail of the situation to which the hon. Gentleman alludes, but I am sure it is something the Minister will take an interest. I hope they can both meet to discuss it further.

Viewing figures for matches that involve the home nations and that are shown free to air during the Six Nations have significantly outperformed viewing figures for, for example, the autumn internationals on subscription services showing the same countries. If rugby risks its broader fanbase, it will become harder to attract other sponsors, and that will become counterproductive in the long term. These are, of course, commercial decisions for private organisations, but Parliament does have a say through the listed sporting events. The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport has powers, using the Broadcasting Act 1996, to draw up a list of sporting events of national interest.

**Ann Davies** (Caerfyrddin) (PC): In Wales, rugby is of course a part of our culture and national identity, and international tournaments such as the Six Nations are an integral part of our national calendar. Caerfyrddin, my constituency, has produced a plethora of first-class players. There are far too many to name, although perhaps I should drop in one or two such as, in the past glory days, Roy Bergiers and Delme Thomas, and more recently, Shane Williams—a phenomenal player—Mike Phillips and, to come up to date, Gareth Davies. There are many more. Does the hon. Member agree that, win or lose—as is our case at the moment—rugby brings us all together in Wales and should be included in group A?

[Ann Davies]

Of course, the free-to-view aspect is also so important for S4C, which produces our Welsh-language-medium coverage of sport. This tournament needs to be included in group A.

**Charlie Dewhirst:** I could not agree more. I hope that the hon. Lady's local clubs will play a key role in the rebuild of the national side and that there will be a few more victories in future.

Returning to listed events, the broadcast rights must be offered to the main free-to-air terrestrial broadcasters on fair and reasonable terms. The aim is to ensure that events are made available to all television viewers and are placed in groups A and B. Any group A events must be shown in full and live by the qualifying broadcaster, but group B can have live coverage on subscription services, as long as the highlights are then provided to free-to-air terrestrial broadcasters.

Currently, group A events include the Olympic and Paralympic games, the men's and women's football world cup finals tournaments, the men's and women's European football championship tournaments, the FA cup final, the Scottish FA cup final, the grand national, the Wimbledon tennis finals, the rugby union world cup final, the Derby and the rugby league Challenge cup final. Group B, which only needs highlights on free to air, is test cricket matches played in England, non-finals play in Wimbledon, all other matches in the rugby union world cup finals tournament, the Commonwealth games, the world athletics championship, the cricket world cup where home nations are playing in the final or semi-final, the Ryder cup, the Open golf championship and the Six Nations.

In terms of basic viewing figures, the Six Nations outperforms a number of events already in group A. England games regularly have in excess of 4 million viewers, which is higher than either the Derby or the rugby league Challenge cup final.

**Chris Bloore** (Redditch) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing the debate. He mentioned his previous occupation, and we had this discussion when the RFU did a deal for England home games in the Six Nations and, I think, for away games against France. We saw a big difference in viewership figures for those England games, which fell from an average of 4 or 5 million to just 2 million. With the Six Nations games now averaging 8 million, it would be a huge drop if we were to return to those sorts of numbers. Perhaps the RFU, and those making this decision, should keep that in mind, particularly when we are trying to get as many people as possible to watch these games.

**Charlie Dewhirst:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman. It is important that we get the timings of the games and everything else right so that we optimise the broadcast number. As we have seen with various experiments in recent years, whether games take place on Friday nights or Sunday afternoons, rather than the traditional Saturday afternoon, also has a bearing. That all needs to be taken into account, as I am sure it will be as the negotiations progress in the coming months.

As has been mentioned, the tournament attracts about 120 million viewers—a clear demonstration of its popularity. The Six Nations matches involving the home countries

should be moved from group B to group A to ensure that this much-loved tournament continues to have the broadest possible reach. That is vital for the health of the game, from elite level down to the grassroots.

Watching our international teams through free-to-air coverage of the Six Nations is often the only exposure fans will have to professional rugby. For many of us across the UK, the opportunity to watch elite club rugby in person is a postcode lottery. My own constituency of Bridlington and The Wolds in East Yorkshire is equidistant from three of the closest English premiership teams: Leicester, Newcastle and Sale. Anyone with the vaguest grasp of geography will know that none of those is remotely close to where I live.

In my part of the world, the grassroots game is therefore the bedrock of local rugby. Clubs such as Bridlington, Driffield, Hornsea and Pocklington do an incredible job of introducing hundreds of boys and girls to the sport every year, ensuring the continued strength of the amateur game. To take one example, Driffield fields six senior teams—four men's teams and two ladies' teams—and has minis and juniors at every age group from under-sixes to under-16s. Those are the epitome of community sports clubs, but many of those kids gave rugby a go only because they wanted to be the next Marcus Smith, Finn Russell or Liam Williams. I suggest that watching the Six Nations, and being inspired by it, is a huge part of the pathway to taking up the sport.

My final point is less about sport and more about our United Kingdom and our friends in Ireland, France and Italy. No other tournament pits England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales against each other, every year, in such a high-profile event. All of us love to use the games to bring up old rivalries and have a cheap dig at our neighbours. However, it is an occasion that shows that there is so much more that unites us than divides us.

**Tonia Antoniazzi:** I thank the hon. Member for giving way on that point, because rugby does bring us together, but we cannot ignore the financial challenges faced by the sport we love in all of the home nations and overseas. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Does the hon. Member agree that it is important that public sector broadcasting comes to the table and is able to be competitive and to provide a future, so that grassroots sport and future generations keep playing rugby and have a love of the sport, as we all do in this Chamber?

**Charlie Dewhirst:** I could not have put it better myself. It is so important to get the balance right between ensuring a secure financial future for our unions and the availability of the game to the widest possible audience. A symbiotic, positive relationship between those things will ensure the healthy future of the game across the United Kingdom.

Sport has a unique ability to be a force for good, and the Six Nations does that as well as any event. I hope the Minister will take this opportunity to consider the importance of the tournament to rugby union and the United Kingdom. I call on her to review the listed sporting events and to put the Six Nations in the top tier, where it belongs.



11.16 am

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Jardine. I am pleased to respond to this debate; I congratulate the hon. Member for Bridlington and The Wolds (Charlie Dewhurst) on securing it and on making such a good speech.

Rugby union has a vital role to play in our national identity around the United Kingdom. The Six Nations is a jewel in the crown of international rugby union. Each year, the competition manages to deliver unpredictable and compelling storylines that captivate audiences across the globe. There are few events with the same level of anticipation. It brings the parts of our country together in fierce but fair rivalry, as the hon. Member concluded.

Through comprehensive broadcast coverage spanning 209 international territories, the 2023 championship reached more than 121 million viewers, who tuned in to watch the action unfold. I will make only brief mention of the weekend to congratulate Scotland and Ireland on their impressive wins; I very much hope that England and Wales can bounce back next weekend.

As well as the success of the men's Six Nations in recent years, the women's Six Nations has risen to prominence and has inspired young girls and women across the country. I am delighted that England will be hosting the 10th edition of the women's rugby world cup this year in August and September. The opening game will take place at the Stadium of Light and the final is scheduled to be held at Twickenham. I look forward to cheering on the Red Roses and the other home countries.

**Tonia Antoniazzi:** The women's Six Nations and the rugby world cup are absolutely tremendous. Rugby union goes from this exciting time of year in February, with the men's Six Nations, through to the women's Six Nations; then we have the Lions and then the women's world cup. It is so exciting. There is such a tension around this: that is why this deal on a paywall or no paywall is so important at this time of year. I urge the Minister to have as many conversations as possible for a positive outcome for everybody.

**Stephanie Peacock:** I am incredibly grateful to my hon. Friend for her contribution, and I pay tribute to her for her work. We have talked about this issue many times. She is absolutely right about the span of rugby throughout the year. I was really lucky to be cheering on the Red Roses at Twickenham a few months ago with my former boss Sylvia Heal, a former Member of this House; I look forward to doing so again in the coming months. I will come on in a moment to some of the points that my hon. Friend raised.

I am aware of reports relating to the broadcasting of the Six Nations from 2026 onwards, which is obviously why the hon. Member for Bridlington and The Wolds secured this timely debate. It should be emphasised that this is a live issue, and it would not be appropriate to comment on every single stage of ongoing commercial negotiations, as I am sure Members will appreciate. However, I recently met Six Nations Rugby to discuss the issue further. It was clear to me that Six Nations Rugby understands the strength of feeling among rugby fans on this issue and appreciates the significant cultural

and financial contribution that the Six Nations makes to each nation's rugby union's governing body, including the RFU. The Government recognise the importance of broadcasting sporting events such as the Six Nations to attract significant audience interest.

The hon. Member for Bridlington and The Wolds proposed changes to the so-called listed events regime that, in his view, would protect free-to-air coverage of the Six Nations. As he outlined, the Broadcasting Act 1996 gives the Secretary of State the power to draw up a list of sporting events of national interest. The broadcast rights to such events must be offered to the main free-to-air terrestrial broadcasters on "fair and reasonable terms". The current listed events regime is designed to ensure that sporting events of national significance are available to as wide an audience as possible, by prohibiting the exclusive broadcasting of the event without the prior consent of Ofcom.

As colleagues will know, the Six Nations is listed under the Act as a group B protected event, which means that although highlights must be offered to free-to-air broadcasters, full live coverage does not need to be made available to them. Listing does not guarantee that an event will be broadcast live or on a free-to-air channel. Rights holders are not required to sell rights for listed events, and free-to-air broadcasters are not obliged to purchase them. Conversely, the example of the Six Nations demonstrates that putting an event in group B does not prevent a rights holder from selling full live coverage rights to a free-to-air broadcaster or broadcasters.

The Government believe that the current list of events works well and strikes an appropriate balance between access to sporting events and allowing sports to maximise broadcasting revenue. We therefore have no plans to review the list at this time. When discussing the Six Nations, it is important to consider that broadcasting income is a significant revenue stream for rugby union and is important to the financial sustainability of all home nations unions. The current Six Nations broadcasting rights are said to be worth £90 million a year—a significant revenue stream for the six rugby governing bodies.

The previous Government loaned premiership clubs £124 million as part of the sport survival package to keep elite-level rugby union alive during the pandemic, and championship clubs were loaned £5 million. We are supporting rugby union authorities to improve the financial sustainability of the sport. Indeed, I recently met the RFU to discuss the future of rugby union.

**Edward Morello:** The Minister makes valid points about the contribution that the Government have made. However, the RFU has lost £30 million and overseen three premiership clubs going bust, so I question whether the Government are doing enough to scrutinise the governing bodies of the game in England.

**Stephanie Peacock:** That is, of course, a matter for the RFU. I took note of the hon. Gentleman's earlier intervention; if it is helpful, I am happy to write to him about the specific points that he raised.

I welcome the recent progress that the game has made on funding distribution and other issues. We will continue to work with the RFU, with representatives of premiership and championship clubs and with the wider sport sector to support the ongoing sustainability of elite and

[Stephanie Peacock]

community-level rugby. More broadly, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport provides the majority of direct support for grassroots sport through our arm's length body Sport England, which invests over £250 million of national lottery and Government money annually. Sport England has awarded £30,859,000 to the RFU—one of its long-term system partners—for the 2022-2027 period, to support men's and women's grassroots rugby union. DCMS has also provided over £28 million of investment to support England's hosting of the 2025 women's rugby world cup, including £14.5 million to support the legacy of that tournament through improvements to facilities and greater opportunities for women and girls at all levels.

Despite that support, the RFU is independent of Government and is responsible for the regulation of rugby union at all levels. Given the financial difficulties facing rugby union, it is right that the RFU and the Six Nations consider the trade-offs between visibility, access to games, maximising revenue and protecting our cultural heritage.

**Tonia Antoniazzi:** I appreciate the Minister's generosity with her time. Does she agree that it is vital that Six Nations coverage be available in the Welsh language for those watching in Wales? As the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin (Ann Davies) mentioned, rugby is different in Wales: the viewing figures are higher, and it is such a huge part of our culture. Will the Minister meet BBC Wales, ITV Wales and S4C to ensure that those conversations about the Welsh language are heard?

**Stephanie Peacock:** I know that 80% of the population in Wales watches the Six Nations. I think Six Nations Rugby is very conscious of that and is taking many steps to protect the Welsh-language broadcast; I know that it is looking at options going forward. I would be happy to meet those organisations—indeed, I do so in my role as media Minister—and to take that forward with my hon. Friend.

It is understandable that the potential for the Six Nations to move away from free-to-air television attracts a great deal of scrutiny and concern from fans. The Government are very aware of that. It is right that the RFU and Six Nations Rugby take a considered and balanced approach, recognising the need to achieve reach to existing and new fans and the importance that the Six Nations has for the cultural pride of every home nation, all while maximising much-needed broadcasting revenue.

This debate has been a brilliant opportunity to discuss the continued success of the Six Nations. I thank the hon. Member for Bridlington and The Wolds once again for securing the debate, and I thank all Members who have attended and taken part.

*Question put and agreed to.*

11.25 am

*Sitting suspended.*

## UK-US Bilateral Relationship

[SIR JOHN HAYES *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

**John Cooper** (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the UK-US bilateral relationship.

It is a pleasure to serve under your tutelage, Sir John, and let me introduce you to a fine Scots word: fankle. It means a tangle, or a confusion. President Donald Trump knows what it means, because his mother was a Scot from the Isle of Lewis, and the White House team know one when they see one. And they see one right here in Britain, as our foreign policy is disjointed, dysfunctional and callow.

The White House has fired the first shots in a trade war, with tariffs and the threat of tariffs shaping policy. The EU is under this sword of Damocles, but we could avoid the sort of damage to key exports, such as Scotch whisky, that we saw when Mr Trump was last atop Pennsylvania Avenue.

Overall, the UK enjoys a balanced scorecard on trade with the US, although our preponderance of services over goods could yet make us a target. Should we side with the EU? The UK exported £179 billion-worth of goods and services to the US in 2023 and we imported £112 billion-worth of US goods. Looking at individual countries, the US is by far our largest export market; Germany is a distant second, with an export market about a third the size of America's.

In today's world, America innovates, China imitates, Europe regulates and Britain prevaricates. Just as President Trump is freeing US industry from its shackles, here Labour is imposing more taxes, more red tape and self-harming nonsense such as the ruinous Employment Rights Bill—the union barons' charter. Labour wants to offshore decision making to courts, to outsourced and unelected lawyers, and to take dictation from the EU. And they want to force through the Chagos fiasco, Britain's biggest capitulation since Singapore in 1942—although we did at least fire some shots 83 years ago.

Can the Minister offer some reassurance today that instead Britain will get off its knees, use the freedoms of Brexit, and stride confidently and boldly into the world, striking our own deals? The Russian bear is scratching at our back door, we feel the hot breath of the Chinese dragon on our neck and under President Trump the American eagle is starting to spread its wings.

Among all that, which way to turn, for our Foreign Secretary seems like a cork in a raging sea? Labour's instincts in time of trouble are to run for the skirts of nanny Europe, but Europe is fading, with sclerotic growth amid political turmoil. Its two great powers, France and Germany, are rudderless and drifting. And although Labour would have us believe that it is resetting relations with the EU, the reality is that our position is pathetic.

The Prime Minister cannot say what he wants from Europe, while they have their invoice already made out; they want a youth mobility scheme that would put yet more pressure on our own children who are seeking their first job. And Europe has avaricious eyes on that old sacrificial lamb—fish from our pristine waters—and to hell with British coastal communities who rely upon the sea's bounty.

Also, we are cosying up to China. The Chancellor is fresh back from “Operation Kowtow” with a few cheap baubles, despite China’s anti-competitive trade practices, even as the diggers move to build Beijing’s London embassy astride critical data cables. We risk feeding the dragon that one day may immolate us.

What then of the United States, which for so long has been our ally under the umbrella of the much-vaunted “special relationship”? Surely the choice is obvious, yet it would mean Labour dealing with a man that it dispatched activists to defeat in the US election. He is, to quote that master diplomat the Foreign Secretary,

“a woman-hating, neo-Nazi-sympathising sociopath. A tyrant in a toupee.”

I will also quote Labour’s choice of ambassador to Washington DC, who called the returning President a “bully”, “reckless” and a “danger to the world.” The Damascene conversion that our diplomats have lately undergone means that Mr Trump is now “a nice man”. And as for KKK jibes? Apparently, they are “old news” that will matter not a jot on Capitol Hill. However, they neither forgive nor forget; the die is cast. What is said cannot be unsaid by fawning. And although the Foreign Secretary boasts of having a meal with the President, perhaps the Minister who is here today could confirm both how little access the Foreign Secretary had to the President and just how massive the humble pie was that he was forced to pretend he enjoyed.

Huge though those problems are, they are nothing compared with the Chagos deal, which will see us cede the strategic joint UK-US Diego Garcia base to distant Mauritius and pay billions to lease it back. We saw the unseemly haste with which Labour wanted to push that deal through, in the face of warnings that Mauritius was moving ever closer to both expansive China and malign Iran.

Now the Foreign Secretary is moving at pace again, scuttling to try to explain to Secretary of State Marco Rubio that the deal is just the job to see off a legal opinion—not a decision—that there might be an issue with the Chagos islands and Diego Garcia in particular. Yes, negotiations were begun by the previous Government but we did not conclude them. We would certainly not have considered the ludicrous terms on offer, where we take something of ours, give it away and then pay through the nose to borrow it back.

The Americans already see what this is: a supine Britain, afraid of a possible legal setback, falling over itself to avoid offending a foreign Government. It is nothing short of a national humiliation. We have a Labour Government frightened of their own shadow, happier to be soft-touch law takers not lawmakers, who would have this sovereign Parliament infantilised and push around by bewigged silks and the Brussels secretariat.

This Government are more worried about the price of Oasis tickets than the cost of making our elected representatives subservient to quangos and arm’s length bodies, and now to the National Assembly in Port Louis, Mauritius, which is further from Diego Garcia than London is from Rome. Aboard his luxury jet—he seems more interested in a Gulfstream G700 than the G7 countries—whisking him to the US, the Foreign Secretary might consider a quote from Mr Rubio:

“Compromise that’s not a solution is a waste of time.”

Against that sort of clear thinking, our toadying diplomats look like battery toys plugged into the mains: out of their depth, out of touch, out of control. China knows the true value of bases such as Diego Garcia. It is even building artificial islands—the great wall of sand—in the South China sea as unsinkable aircraft carriers. The US will rightly torpedo Labour’s woeful Chagos sell-out.

**John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important and timely debate. Does he agree that, despite the best efforts of the Labour Government, there is a long-standing and enduring relationship between the USA, Scotland and the rest of the UK? More importantly from our perspective as Scottish MPs, Tartan Week in New York is a good example of that strong relationship between the US and Scotland.

**John Cooper:** I agree completely. I was privileged to join my hon. Friend at Tartan Week in America, which is a key showcase for all things Scottish. We are lucky that President Trump is effectively an Ayrshire businessman, since he owns a golf course in Scotland.

If the Chagos deal were in effect vetoed by America, would our Foreign Secretary dare continue, in the event of such mortification? What price Downing Street’s hostage-to-fortune claim that the Foreign Secretary will still be in post at the next election? If their 3-amp fuses do not blow too soon, perhaps our underpowered team might get to discuss defence with America. The US wants NATO to pull its budgetary weight. Might we hear today where Labour are with plans to lift defence spending to 2.5% of GDP, given the first casualty of their mishandling of the economy has been growth? Will it happen, and when?

If we are moving ever closer to faceless and distant Strasbourg and Brussels, as yesterday’s visit by the PM surely signposts, we ought to consider Ireland, which sums up America’s issue with European freeloading on defence. Ireland is not in NATO, yet is under the aegis of the British-supplied nuclear deterrent. The undersea cables that see US tax dollars converted to euros and piled into the coffers of Dublin are at risk from Putin’s shadow fleet.

Those data cables are as critical today as were the convoys from America and Canada during the battle of the Atlantic, and every bit as vulnerable. The country’s only defence, since Ireland has zero underwater capability, is Britain—the same Britain Ireland is happy to traduce in international courts over the troubles. We have a rare window of opportunity with Mr Trump and his White House team, but the puerile insults keep coming. The titanic struggle playing out now is between the oldest superpower, the United States, and the newest, China. Europe, prickling with full outrage at the new US President, is sidelined. It is, at best, indifferent to the UK and wants to make even new defence agreements transactional, all about commercial deals, even as the fires of conflict blaze. China need not be our enemy, but it is not our friend. Its industrial heft means genuine competition in many areas is impossible. Its annual production of batteries is sufficient for global needs—no wonder UK plans for a gigafactory have come to nothing.

We must seek every advantage we can, and the US offers the most fertile ground. We speak the same language, George Bernard Shaw’s adage that we are two nations separated by a common language notwithstanding.



[John Cooper]

The late unpleasantness of the American revolution is in the rear-view mirror. We have a shared history of standing for liberty, and our transatlantic co-operation on defence is unmatched. US forces are the big stick; they see ours as a precision scalpel.

Labour does not lack for numbers in this Parliament. Is there no one in their serried ranks who can see that an anglophile US President, a man of immense pragmatism, offers us a chance to form a mutually beneficial relationship and perhaps a full trade deal—or are they the new model terracotta army, which looks impressive from a distance, but which sits mute, eyes painted on, as their leaders tread the same old worn and fruitless path to Brussels and show a bit of ankle to China? Enough of Oliver Twist: “Please Mr Xi and Ms von der Leyen, may we have some more?”

In 1942, Prime Minister Winston Churchill boarded a flying boat on Loch Ryan in my Dumfries and Galloway constituency, destination the United States. His message then was,

“let us go forward together”. —[*Official Report*, 13 May 1940; Vol. 360, c. 1502.]

We should deliver the same message to Washington today.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Sir John Hayes (in the Chair):** Order. First, I will call Members who bob, so please could those who wish to be called make sure to bob? Secondly, I remind Members that they should be here for the start of a debate if they want to contribute, but I will try to be generous. Thirdly, so that all who want to can speak, let us try to work on the basis of about four minutes each. That is informal at this stage, but as we continue, we will look at it again.

2.42 pm

**Preet Kaur Gill** (Birmingham Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I thank the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) for calling this debate on the UK-US bilateral relationship. I listened closely to his speech and we agree on the importance of the UK-US relationship and our desire to build on those bonds.

Britain's place in the world matters. After the needless fights and petty politicking of the last Government, which did so much damage to our relationships around the world, I am proud that our Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have made reconnecting with our allies a priority of this Government. After the furore of the Northern Ireland protocol, the collapse of US-UK trade talks, and strains following Brexit, I am glad that we now have a Government who are ready to put the national interest, rather than party interests, first.

It was Winston Churchill who first described the UK-US relationship as “special”. For centuries, the relationship between our two nations has been one of collaboration, co-operation and enduring partnership. Together, we have defended the world from tyranny and two world wars, stood strong in the cold war, and for centuries worked closely towards our mutual security and prosperity. I put on record my congratulations to President Trump on his inauguration, and we look forward to working with him in the years ahead.

As the Prime Minister has said, we will continue to build upon the unshakeable foundations of our transatlantic alliance as we tackle the global challenges together. We have our shared language, close cultural exchange, strong ties in commerce, and the many links between our peoples through business, friendships and family. Indeed, President Trump's mother was Scottish and I know he has always been very fond of our country. I am sure that the depth of friendship will continue.

The Prime Minister had a warm and constructive conversation with President Trump the other week, during which they discussed the economy. President Trump stated that they “get along well” and that the Prime Minister is doing a “good job”.

There has been a lot of noise around our relationship with the United States and the new Administration, much of it coming from the Opposition Benches. There have been, as there always will be, things that we disagree on. We clearly did not agree with Elon Musk's outlandish attacks on members of the Government, but differences on single matters of policy do not diminish the deep and enduring relationship between us and the United States. I dare say that the previous Government disagreed with the Biden Administration on many things.

I regret to note that the Opposition really seem to be getting carried away, with Members seeming to suggest that the Government must choose between our relationship with the EU and our relationship with the United States. Last week, the shadow Business Secretary, the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), suggested that improving our relationship with both the EU and the US was akin to an attempt at

“making love simultaneously to a rhino and a sloth.”

Leaving aside why anyone would want to do either of those things, is it not exactly that destructive attitude that has caused so much damage to British businesses and UK trade over the past 14 years?

In these dangerous times, the idea that we must choose between our allies—that somehow we are either with America or with Europe—is wrong. Last year, the UK's total trade in goods and services with the United States was £294 billion, and with the EU it was £822 billion. Our co-ordination with the United States on defence, security and foreign policy is indispensable, as is our co-ordination with Europe, our closest neighbours. Attlee did not choose between allies, nor did Churchill. The national interest requires that we work with both the EU and the US.

In the years ahead, the UK will again stand tall on the world stage. This Government's commitment to international law, their commitment to growing our economy and free trade, and their work navigating the new, more challenging multipolar era are all worthy of Opposition Members' serious engagement, not party political sniping. Our shared history with the United States, our close security and defence partnerships and our economic ties matter more than words. This Government will continue to invest in the transatlantic relationship in the years to come.

2.46 pm

**Mr Peter Bedford** (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of

Members' Financial Interests; I serve in the British-American Parliamentary Group. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) for securing this important debate.

As President George H. W. Bush once said,

"America has no truer friend than Great Britain."

That sentiment has been repeated time and again but, sadly, we now have a Government seemingly intent on weakening that vital bond. We have a Foreign Secretary who, without hesitation, labelled the leader of the free world a

"racist and KKK/neo-Nazi sympathiser";

a Health Secretary who referred to him as an "odious...little man"; and, perhaps most concerning of all, a Prime Minister who accused the leader of the free world of an "attack on democracy"—a far cry from leadership figures such as Churchill, Thatcher and even Blair, who understood the value of forging strong and meaningful relations with our closest ally.

Unfortunately, it is not just the Government's words of woke condemnation that are cause for concern, but their actions. The Trump Administration have unequivocally expressed their concerns about the Foreign Secretary's reckless proposal to cede sovereignty over the strategically vital Chagos islands to Mauritius. Yet the Foreign Secretary pressed ahead, attempting to finalise the deal before President Trump officially took office. That pattern of misguided priorities and dangerous diplomacy cannot be ignored. Do the Government believe that the special relationship no longer matters?

Prime Minister after Prime Minister and President after President have been steadfast in their commitment to that enduring relationship. Why? Because both sides recognise that our trade is worth more than £300 billion, with 1.2 million Americans working in British companies and 1.5 million British citizens working for American firms. The UK imports around £58 billion in goods from the US and exports £60.4 billion in return. Our Chancellor has stated that she is focused on growth, so surely consolidating and strengthening those economic ties must be a top priority? The previous Government were in talks with President Trump about a post-Brexit deal that would have seen trade increase by potentially

"three to four, five times".

It is deeply concerning that some Members on the Government Benches and all those on the Liberal Democrat Benches seem intent on undermining the biggest democratic decision this country has ever made: our decision to leave the European Union. Rejoining the EU customs union would not only be undemocratic, but would damage our special relationship with American businesses and prevent us from fostering our own independent trade deals.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway recognised, President Trump is an Anglophile. He has property in Scotland and a deep sentimental connection to British culture and the royal family. It would be regrettable to see that bond undermined by a Government determined to placate the cultural left at every opportunity. It is therefore essential that the Government invite President Trump over for a state visit at the earliest opportunity. That would send a powerful message to the world that the special relationship between our two great nations is as strong as ever.

The Government must stop playing politics with our national interest. The United States is and always will be our greatest ally. We share a history, a culture and, most importantly, a vision for how the world should be. The Government must act now to secure our future and preserve the special relationship for generations to come.

2.50 pm

**Steve Yemm** (Mansfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I thank the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) for securing this debate, and I look forward to visiting his constituency in a couple of weeks for a short holiday during recess.

Like the UK, the USA recently voted for decisive change. I heartily congratulate President Trump on his election. People here in the UK and across the Atlantic have been feeling the impact of low economic growth, with a decline in productivity and GDP per capita for many years. From Mansfield, Massachusetts to my constituency of Mansfield, Nottinghamshire, people are feeling the impact in their pockets. They know how tough things are out there for their families. The recent changes in both Governments are clearly a response to the frustration felt by both electorates, and it is therefore in both our countries' interests to work together to deal with the issue.

Despite many attempts to highlight the differences between the two Administrations, we have a great deal in common. Both Governments have made much of their agenda for growth: the US Secretary of the Treasury Scott Bessent said that an increase in GDP should be seen as a key performance indicator of the Trump presidency, while here at home my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has also made it clear that economic growth is the Government's No. 1 mission, a message reiterated through announcements in the past week. We all understand that, primarily, a Government must ensure the economic security of the electorate and give them confidence that they will be better off. However, to earn the right even to be heard on the crucial issue of the economy, parties—in opposition or in government—must prove beyond doubt that they can also ensure the safety and security of the nation.

Here in the UK we have been steadily increasing our defence spending as a share of GDP over the last 10 years. It is currently at just over 2.3%, higher than the NATO target and higher than most other NATO countries. The new Administration in the United States want NATO allies to do more, and I agree that we must. We live in an increasingly dangerous world, and it is right that we and our European allies are asked to do, and do, more. Only yesterday the Prime Minister was in Brussels urging our European neighbours to spend more on defence and to step up and shoulder more of the burden.

We underestimate the threat of Vladimir Putin and Russia at our peril. The Government must go further, with an aspiration to spend 2.5% and beyond on defence as soon as possible. That alignment of priorities should be seen as an opportunity for us here in the UK. It is an opportunity for the UK to be the bridge between US and our European neighbours and, most importantly, NATO. We can take the case to the United States by jointly demonstrating our unshakable commitment to the alliance through our contributions to defence spending. Britain must take the lead on that agenda.

[Steve Yemm]

As a former chief executive officer in the United States and as someone who spent many years there in Massachusetts and California, I wholeheartedly support the Government's efforts to work more closely with the new US Administration. The special relationship is paramount to the international diplomatic network. Both Administrations share a renewed confidence from their electorate based upon the common agendas that I have outlined, and it is on those agendas that we must build a much stronger relationship with the United States going forward.

2.54 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I thank the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) for raising this topic at such a timely moment, as we look to the start of the new US Administration.

The new Administration offers an opportunity for greater UK-US relations, which is something we should jump at. Although I have not always been the greatest supporter of the Donald Trump portrayed in the media, I certainly admire some of the steps already taken by the Administration. I am pleased to have a presidency that seems to have a grasp of the special relationship with the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland that we should treasure. We have moved from a former President who called us Brits—that was meant as a slur, by the way—and promised that no orange feet would ever be in the White House, so I could never have gone because I am an Orangeman. He had a very clear, biased opinion. We now have President Trump—a man who treasures his Ulster Scots roots and has the respect for our monarchy that we all hold. What a difference a year makes.

I was heartened to hear the interview in which the President highlighted massive concerns with the EU, which many of us share, yet he indicated his belief that the relationship with the UK could be retained. There is a real possibility of the friendship between our nations being restored to what it once was, which can only benefit us on both sides of the ocean.

**Carla Lockhart** (Upper Bann) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be utterly outrageous if the benefits of any trade deal with the US were not felt equally in Northern Ireland—an integral part of the United Kingdom—because of the protocol? Does he agree that this Labour Government need to take action and remove the Irish sea border, so that Northern Ireland can benefit from any trade deal done with the US?

**Jim Shannon:** I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. She stands alongside the rest of us in relation to this issue.

I am further encouraged that Vice-President J. D. Vance has close Ulster Scots roots that have shaped him. Now is the time to highlight the fact that so much good in America has a foundation in our shared Ulster Scots values of hard work, courage, family, commitment and fairness. There are multiple large businesses in my constituency, such as Rich Sauces and Lakeland Dairies, that have a great business co-operation with the United States of America. There is so much space for greater investment and economic improvement for both Northern Ireland and the US.

The US and Canada are two of Northern Ireland's important markets both for exports and inward investment, with over 320 North American firms choosing to establish themselves there—that is the relationship that we have. In the 12 months leading up to March 2024, exports to those markets reached £2.3 billion, highlighting the wealth of opportunities available for local companies. We have a new opportunity, under a new Administration, to make new conditions and make Northern Ireland even greater and bigger within this great United Kingdom of Great Britain.

Many Americans have their roots in what is now Northern Ireland and in Scotland. Their Scots Irish or Ulster Scots roots are something to be proud of, and I believe that we can and should build on those links to bring greater cultural tourism to Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Assembly will work on that as well, but there is more to be done. We are a place of peace and open for business, and that needs to be highlighted not simply by the Northern Ireland Executive, but by this Parliament and in this debate.

I will finish with this point, because I am conscious of the numbers who want to speak and the time limit. Donald Trump is a businessman of action, and he responds to that. His Administration have been working hard since day one to bring about change, so let us ensure that greater friendship and business co-operation with the United Kingdom, particularly with Northern Ireland, is brought to his attention and acted upon as a matter of urgency, not left to linger in the ether—to use an Ulster Scotsism. The time to act is now, so let us get going and improve our mutually beneficial relationship.

I look forward to the Minister's response; he always tries to give us the answers that we request. I also look forward to the response from the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), a lady of integrity.

2.59 pm

**John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I thank the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) for bringing such an important subject to this Chamber.

No political party has a monopoly on patriotism, the flag or, certainly, the UK-US relationship. It is a relationship vested in our shared values of democracy, freedom and the international rules-based system. It is based on our shared history of defending and nurturing these values; frequently we have done so by fighting side by side in wars. It is a relationship based on our armed forces co-operating and our intelligence services working closely together in our mutual national interests. Most fundamentally, it is a relationship between two peoples that is based on friendship, exchange and respect.

In that context, I must refer to the words of the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway, which I felt were hyperbolic and unbecoming of such an important subject. He spoke about “supine Britain” and “national humiliation”, and said our defence was, compared with the United States, merely “a precision scalpel”. That is somewhat hypocritical, given that his party saw our Army shrink to the smallest size since the Napoleonic wars. We on the Labour Benches will not take any lectures on our armed forces from him.



The hon. Member spoke about “toadying diplomats”. I regard that as deeply offensive to the diplomats around the world who work around the clock to look after our national interests and our citizens when they are in peril, doing everything they can to enhance our international relationships. He spoke about Labour Ministers having made comments in the past about President Trump. I merely ask whether he has ever investigated the comments of the former British Prime Minister and Mayor of London regarding President Trump. Referring to the torpedoing of Labour’s policy was also unfortunate and dangerous language.

I will defer to my hon. Friend the Minister on the Government’s bilateral relationship with the USA, but I want to touch on a couple of personal aspects of the relationship. In 2009, 16 years ago, I was fortunate to be invited by the US State Department to take part in an international visitor leadership programme—a three-week visit to the United States. That is an example of the US investing in the bilateral relationship. The rumour is that those who go on the IVLP visits are deemed to be people who may one day have some influence; well, 16 years later, I am an MP, so there must have been something right about that.

**Jim Shannon:** Three Members who are present were in the Northern Ireland Assembly back in the late ’90s and early 2000s, when the United States Government sponsored us to go to America and learn how to govern, so it is not just the hon. Gentleman who benefited from that.

**John Slinger:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I support all such schemes, which strengthen the relationship between our two countries.

I saw the military co-operation between our two countries in operation in Iraq, when I visited Baghdad in 2005 and 2006 with Prime Minister Blair’s special envoy to Iraq, the late right hon. Ann Clwyd. I also have good friends in the United States, as I am sure we all do. I want to refer to my late friend Michael McCarthy, whom I got to know when we were both studying for master’s degrees—in my case, in international studies—at Durham University in 2001, and in whose memory I established a lecture at my old college at Durham, University College. The lecture raises money for a travel bursary in his name, which allows students who would not otherwise be able to do so to visit the United States during their studies. That is the special relationship in action—investing in the special relationship to develop friendships.

The bilateral relationship is a relationship that transcends party-political boundaries. It is not owned by one party. It should not be exploited for political purposes or political gain, particularly given that the United States and the United Kingdom have so much to gain from it. Indeed, the rest of the free world depends in some ways on a very healthy, strong bilateral relationship between our two great countries.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Sir John Hayes (in the Chair):** I am grateful to colleagues for their co-operation. Six Members are standing, and I will call the Front Benchers at 3.28 pm, so brevity would be appreciated. Three to four minutes would be brilliant.

3.5 pm

**Nigel Farage (Clacton) (Reform):** When it comes to debating the potential of the special relationship with this incoming Administration, I think I am in a fortunate position. It is not just that for 10 years I have stood up and defended President Trump—I was very much on my own in those days—but that I know half his Cabinet. We should consider ourselves incredibly lucky, because it is not just the President who is an Anglophile, as the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) said. I promise Members that half the Cabinet are; indeed, senior members of the Administration have children at school in London as we speak. We have a unique opportunity over the next four years and I really hope we exploit it.

During his last term as President, Trump said to me personally that he really wanted to do a free trade deal with the United Kingdom. Now, I know he is very keen on tariffs—tariffs are being put on all over the world, and no doubt the EU will feel some of that—but with us he was very happy to have a free trade deal. He felt that it would not be unfair, because we are roughly operating on similar levels and with similar costs. Those opportunities are fantastic.

On defence, we should face the fact that without America we are defenceless, so it matters, but we should think about the bit that we give back. Diego Garcia is probably the single most important thing that we give America right now. Without it, America does not have access to the middle east, India and much else. It is the single most important island in the world for America—after Hawaii, obviously—so it really matters.

We have had news in the last hour that the Government are going to push ahead with the surrender of the sovereignty of the Chagos islands, at a reported cost of up to £19 billion—I am sure that cannot be true. I warn the Government that they may not be getting huge pushback from America at this moment in time, because they have a list as long as your arm of other priorities, but once they realise that we do not even have that to give them any more, our value to them in that two-way relationship will be considerably reduced. I genuinely fear that if this continues and the American Administration wakes up to it—I could quote three members of the Cabinet I have spoken to personally about it—our chances of not just avoiding tariffs but moving on to a sectoral free trade deal will all but evaporate. The special relationship will be dangerously fractured if the Government carry on with this, so I urge them to please, please give the American Administration a few weeks to think about this while they settle into office.

I will finish on one quick point about the economics. In 2008, the eurozone economy was exactly the same size as the American economy, but 16 years on the American economy is double the size of the eurozone. We do not have to say, “America not Europe,” or “Europe not America”; the really important thing is to understand where the growth is and where the investment will come from. Whatever new terms we seek with Brussels—if it is just a good relationship, that is fine—we must not tie ourselves to an EU rulebook that prohibits free trade with the USA. Economically, it is the future, and the EU is the past.

3.9 pm

**Chris Evans** (Caerphilly) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I congratulate the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) on his eloquent and passionate speech although, as he would expect, I do not agree with much of what he said.

I am pleased to follow the man whom YouGov called the 31st most famous person in Britain in 2024. I am sure that in 2025 he will be looking to move up the charts as quickly as possible.

When I have thought about what has happened over the past couple of days, my mind has often drifted back to a very wet holiday in Cornwall a couple of years ago, when I read “The Art of the Deal”. If anybody wants to see President Trump’s thinking, they just need to read that book. He says that the worst thing a person can do when he wants to make a deal is to look too desperate, and the most important thing, he says, is to have leverage in that deal. There has been a lot of talk since November about how we want to be friends with President Trump, and a lot of people have taken back what they have said about him, but the truth is that we have to look at the deal and the leverage that we have.

We will always be strategically important to the US. Our relationship has deep roots in defence, security and intelligence, and our armed forces have always fought alongside each other. The United States can access UK intelligence networks in states where it lacks its own. It gets to work through British counterparts in the Commonwealth and many places where we hold more significant historical ties. The UK also gets a good deal; we have great bilateral intelligence-sharing agreements, and UK diplomats in the US have a particularly strong relationship with key policymakers.

My worry going into this debate was that we would make this about personality, and we would start talking about the personality of Donald Trump or the Prime Minister. Presidents and Prime Ministers come and go. In four years’ time, Donald Trump will not be President any more—the US constitution says so. For too long, when we have talked about the special relationship, we have reduced it down to personality. That may go back to Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, but let us not forget that they fell out over the Falklands when Reagan tried to intervene.

Whether we support Trump or not, and whatever we think of him personally, the fact is that we have to be a critical friend. We cannot blindly obey or expect obedience from each other; that is not how it works. I recall many years ago, when I was working for Lord Touhig, he gave a speech on the UK-US involvement in Iraq. He said then:

“True friends tell each other the truth, no matter how difficult and painful that might be from time to time. It is up to this Government to be honest and plain-speaking with our American friends.”—[*Official Report*, 22 November 2006; Vol. 453, c. 570.]

He said that the relationship

“must be a true partnership, in which we do not always hitch our wagon to America’s star on foreign and defence policy.”—[*Official Report*, 22 November 2006; Vol. 453, c. 568.]

This has been done before. In the 1960s, Lyndon Johnson desperately wanted this country to get involved in the debacle of Vietnam. The national security adviser McGeorge Bundy advised the President:

“We want to make very sure that the British get it into their heads that it makes no sense for us to rescue the pound while there is no British flag in Vietnam.”

Wilson offered Johnson other reassurances—generally those that aligned with his own view on the right course of action, including that British bases at Suez would be maintained—but he did not give in on the matter of Vietnam. I have to say with all candour that I wish we had had the same attitude in the early 2000s when we were approaching the situation in Afghanistan.

Deals will have to be made with America, but we have to remember that whether it be President Trump, Biden or Kennedy, the American President is elected with one aim in mind: to make sure that he gets the best deal for America. Otherwise, what is the point in electing him? It is the same for us in this country. We expect the British Prime Minister to get the best possible deal, but, in an uncertain time, that does not mean that we forgo our principles. We do not have to be selective in our battles. We can make our views clear and remain strong, but our priority must always be this country and putting our priorities first. That is the only way we can continue to make this relationship special.

3.13 pm

**Lincoln Jopp** (Spelthorne) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) on securing the debate at this pivotal time. It is typically prescient of him to have done so.

When considering my remarks, my first thought was to try to embarrass the Government by replaying all the disgraceful, disobliging and damaging comments that members of the Labour party have made about America, and particularly about President Trump. It might be fun, I thought, to see Government Members squirm, particularly if I could find some choice comments by the Minister himself. However, having researched the dreadful, embarrassing comments, I cannot in good conscience replay them here.

I am a patriot. I have fought for my country all over the world, often alongside our American cousins and usually with an American as my boss. I served for General Schwarzkopf in the first Gulf war, on the staff of the superb General David Petraeus in the second Gulf war and under Marine Corps General Richard Mills in the Helmand river valley of Afghanistan. In Sierra Leone, my bacon was well and truly saved by the USS Kearsarge and its embarked port of marines. I cannot replay Labour’s embarrassing catalogue of errors or risk making our relationship with the United States any weaker than it currently is.

Indeed, in my own small way I have been doing my own bit to strengthen Anglo-American relations by employing as my senior parliamentary assistant a no-nonsense native New Yorker from Queens. When Gloria tells me to jump, I do not ask why; I simply ask, “How high?” But my relationship with my parliamentary assistant should never be replicated at a national level. We need to be a strong nation and to conduct our relations from that position of strength.

Of course, much of what we contribute to this relationship we cannot talk about, because it is secret and long may it remain so, but in the public realm it is very clear that the Government are playing for time with their strategic defence review, which is primarily there to produce the political cover for increasing defence expenditure to 2.5% of GDP. That is a mistake being played out in public. By not having a threat-based and foreign policy-led review, we are missing a huge opportunity to face down the real-world threats that we see today. Everyone in Government seems to have forgotten the old adage: "Prepare for the war you don't want to have to fight." The answer, instead, seems to be "2.5% of GDP—now, what's the question?"

America has a clear-eyed view of its national interest and we should have one of ours. It has been striking to see the speed with which the Trump Administration has hit the ground running. Not for him the interminable list of reviews, taskforces and consultations that our own Government prefer.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the Chagos islands, which our Government propose to give away the sovereignty of, only to lease them back at vast expense for the British taxpayer. That is surely the worst plan since the Prime Minister hired a voice coach. He must rethink the proposed course of action and not simply hope that it never reaches the top of the President's in-tray. I echo the sentiments of the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) in that regard. It will reach the top of that in-tray, and this Government will be embarrassed at how cackhandedly this fiasco has been handled. The Government should climb down, and climb down quickly.

In the late 1950s, the French were demanding that all US forces leave French soil and Dean Rusk asked pointedly, "Does that include the dead ones in the military cemeteries?" The UK's relationship with the US was probably at its lowest ebb following Suez. It has improved since and is strong today. Much of that strength was paid for by the sacrifice of our own troops, serving alongside and indeed for our American cousins. The Government must not squander that inheritance. Instead, they will honour our fallen by making this country stronger and by forging a stronger special relationship with the United States.

**Sir John Hayes (in the Chair):** Members can see that we have about 11 minutes left for Back-Bench speakers, so let us divide it between the three remaining Back-Bench speakers.

3.18 pm

**Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I commend the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) for securing this important debate.

The hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) rightly talked about the huge advantages of a trade deal with the US. As a vet who grew up on a farm, I gently point out that not all standards are the same, and we know that in any trade deal the US will be very keen to sell us products such as chlorinated chicken, or beef that has been produced using growth hormones and farming methods that include antibiotics to a higher extent than we would. Not only would such products undermine our environmental and animal welfare standards;

they would also put our own farmers at a competitive disadvantage. It is not just vets and farmers who are proud of our high animal welfare standards; the British public are, too. They do not want those standards to be compromised. I urge the Minister to ensure that in any trade deals our farmers and our animal welfare standards are protected.

The withdrawal of the US from the World Health Organisation prevents a significant challenge for UK public health, because the US provided about a fifth of the entire WHO budget and its departure creates an immediate funding shortfall. It is not only UK public health that will be affected but global public health. The intent to withdraw from the World Health Organisation will restrict communications from the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention.

These measures are likely to have a significant implication for global and UK public health security. The US plays critical roles in the surveillance of infectious diseases, including giving direct support to develop capacity overseas, monitoring the threat of antibiotic-resistant infectious, and recognising and investigating emerging infectious diseases with pandemic potential. USAID programmes are often heavily involved in ensuring access to vaccines for diseases such as polio, which has almost been eradicated, but while it is present anywhere in the world, is still a threat to the UK.

**Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD):** The UK and the US have long led on humanitarian aid—saving lives and preventing crises. Scrapping USAID abandons that leadership, worsening global instability. International aid fosters security and economic growth, reducing forced migration. Does my hon. Friend agree that the UK must persuade the US to rethink that decision?

**Dr Chambers:** I totally agree with my hon. Friend's insightful comment. In both those scenarios, withdrawal from key agencies will reduce global awareness and increase the chances of future global health crises. World Health Organisation-collaborating centres around the world, including those in the US, directly inform the development of our annual influenza vaccine, which is a vital aspect of reducing a significant pressure on the NHS every winter.

Meanwhile, it is currently unclear how the US stance on wider public health agencies may shift in the future. Just this week, the World Organisation for Animal Health reported the emergence of highly pathogenic H5N9 avian influenza in poultry for the first time in the US. This is an evolving situation for which the Centre for Disease Control would normally provide crucial updates. How orders to cease communications may impact the service remains to be seen.

The UK also invests heavily in supporting capacity building for overseas infectious disease surveillance as part of delivering our own national action and public health plans. I ask the Minister: are there plans to conduct an impact assessment on how the withdrawal of the US from key public health agencies may impact public health security in the UK? Although we totally understand that we cannot replace all that US funding, do the Government envision a requirement or see opportunities for the UK to expand or review its existing programmes to ensure stability of its global public health interests?



[Dr Chambers]

For so many people in need around the world, UK and US foreign aid has been the difference between life and death. Whether tackling climate change, pandemics or extreme poverty, the Liberal Democrats believe in global solutions to global problems, and in the importance of international development when building a more peaceful and prosperous world, with the UK leading the way. That is why we are eventually hoping to see our international development budget restored to 0.7% of GDP. Not only will that make the world more stable; it will also make the UK a safer and healthier place to live.

**Sir John Hayes (in the Chair):** Three minutes each now. I call Iqbal Mohamed.

3.22 pm

**Iqbal Mohamed** (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John, and I thank the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) for securing this debate. I put on record my membership of the British-American Parliamentary Group. I also congratulate President Trump on his election and inauguration, and I thank him for his role in bringing about the ceasefire in Gaza.

A truly special and constructive bilateral relationship between the UK and the US is essential. Key elements of such a relationship must be: mutual respect, where both nations respect each other's sovereignty and decisions by valuing each other's perspectives and priorities without imposing one's will on the other; equality, with a balanced partnership where both countries have an equal say in decisions, with collaborative decision making ensuring that both parties benefit fairly from the relationship; shared goals and values, where the relationship is built on common values such as democracy, human rights and the rule of law; and being a critical friend, and having open, transparent and honest communication where both nations are able to express their concerns and opinions freely, fostering an environment of trust and understanding.

Instead, I am afraid to say, the UK-US special relationship is often described as toxic, abusive and destructive, due to several key factors. There is an imbalance of power where the relationship is frequently characterised with the UK as the junior partner. That dynamic has led to the UK being pressured into supporting US policies and actions that do not align with our own national interests or ethical standards. Political manipulation by the US, forcing the UK's political alignment, has sometimes resulted in catastrophic decisions—for example, the UK's support for the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, based on questionable or fabricated intelligence, which led to significant loss of life and long-term regional instability.

A special relationship is important and essential. However, our country's best interest is not served by blind subservience in the face of US power. The disasters of failed wars in Afghanistan and Iraq show only too well where that leads. The failures post 9/11 continue to reverberate decades later, whether in the form of refugees from Afghanistan appearing on our shores or the continued threat of ISIS. I hope that the Government's failure to challenge US support for Israeli apartheid in the west bank and the genocide in Gaza will not also come back to haunt our country in the years and decades to come.

In conclusion, it is crucial for the UK to assert its sovereignty and pursue an independent path that aligns with international law and its own values, and to be a positive influence on the US.

3.26 pm

**Jim Allister** (North Antrim) (TUV): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I want to use this debate to try to get an answer to a question that I asked in PMQs a few weeks ago, and to which I did not get an answer. How does the United Kingdom Government hope to obtain a trade deal for the United Kingdom so long as the customs laws, the trade laws and many of the economic laws of a part of this United Kingdom are made not in the United Kingdom by Parliament but by the EU? How, without the unity of a common customs base, a common trade base and common standards affecting the goods that can be imported and exported from our country, do we obtain a trade deal with a third country such as the United States?

If President Trump proceeds with his threatened tariffs on the EU, does that mean they will apply to Northern Ireland because we are subject to the EU's wretched trade laws and tariffs and everything else that goes with it? When and how will the United Kingdom put ourselves in a position where we can obtain a trade deal applicable to all the United Kingdom so long as it persists with the partitioning protocol agreement that divides the United Kingdom and leaves part of it under the control of a foreign power? Or are this Government interested only in a trade deal that would benefit Great Britain? Have they abandoned any interest in a trade deal for the whole United Kingdom? I would like an answer to that question, and I would like the Minister to explain how it is even possible, legally, to obtain a trade deal for the whole United Kingdom so long as this Government do not control the trade laws of the whole United Kingdom.

**Sir John Hayes (in the Chair):** I am very grateful to all right hon. and hon. Members for their brevity. I am determined to ensure that those who want to speak get the opportunity to do so. Thank you for your co-operation this afternoon. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesman.

3.28 pm

**Calum Miller** (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): It is a pleasure to speak with you in the Chair today, Sir John. I thank the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) for securing today's debate on this important topic. The level of interest shows how important the issue is to our country. Many Members, including the hon. Members for Rugby (John Slinger), for Mansfield (Steve Yemm) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) have spoken warmly of how they have benefited from the historical relationship between the United Kingdom and the United States.

Let us be in no doubt: the US is a key ally of the UK, and our relationship today is the consequence of close co-operation across many generations. Unfortunately, Donald Trump is not concerned about the preservation of any relationship. He is threatening Denmark and Panama, bullying Canada and Mexico and undermining NATO by praising Putin's aggression towards Ukraine.

In personal and international relations, the President is unpredictable and disloyal. He breaks laws and he lies. He bullies and intimidates. He does not see the benefit of institutions that foster co-operation and promote stability and peace. That represents a threat to the UK's relationship with the US and to the UK's wider interests.

The hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway had some colourful rhetorical flourishes, but they could not mask the brass neck of his remarks, for his Conservative party is in no position to criticise others for selling the UK short in global affairs. From their botched Brexit deal to the rushed trade deals that betrayed British farmers under the last Government, the UK shrank from leadership and stood small on the global stage.

We know that Donald Trump likes to set the news agenda by making outrageous pronouncements. The only thing I agreed with in the speech by the hon. Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) is that we should focus not on the statements but on his deeds. Sadly, even in his first days in office, actions by the new US Administration underscore that we cannot depend on the US in the way that we have in the past. In critical areas, this US Administration have moved far away from the rules-based order that has marked the partnership between the UK and the US over the last 60 or more years.

For example, we have seen Donald Trump sign an executive order to withdraw the US from the World Health Organisation. As my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) set out, we are in an era when the UK and all countries depend on one another for health security. Covid-19, severe acute respiratory syndrome, mpox—these viruses know no borders. International co-operation is critical if we are to protect our citizens. The hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) said we were lucky in the members of the Administration. Since a number of them disregard vaccine science, it is deeply concerning to see the US withdraw from international health co-operation.

Donald Trump has also withdrawn the US from the Paris climate agreement while encouraging US oil companies to renew extensive drilling operations including in sensitive environmental settings. Recent reports from Copernicus show how rapidly the globe is heating. Climate emergencies from fires in California to extreme rainfall and flooding in Valencia and in the UK show that the impacts are no abstract future threat. This decision by the new Administration sets back hard-won international progress and undermines collective efforts to reduce carbon emissions and protect future generations.

Take, too, the recent announcement of a stop to all USAID funding, alongside the briefing that the Administration wants to wind up USAID entirely. USAID is the world's largest single aid donor. In 2023, it disbursed \$72 billion of aid worldwide. In countries across the globe, UK Aid has worked alongside our US partners to support women and girls, the victims of conflict and those displaced by climate emergencies and natural disasters. The consequences of this unilateral action by the US Administration have been severe. From Ukraine to Syria to Sudan, cuts to US support have put lives at risk while throwing international partnerships into disarray. As my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester highlighted, USAID cuts threaten progress in eradicating illnesses such as polio once and for all.

We have urged this Government not to abandon Parliament's historic commitment to provide 0.7% of GNI in overseas aid. Leadership with our international partners on international development is all the more critical in light of the capriciousness of the US Administration. Perhaps the greatest worry comes from the Administration's approach to Russia and Ukraine. In the White House, the President described Putin's illegal war as genius. Meantime, his vice-president has advocated a proposal that would give Russia the territory that it has illegally seized.

The post-war security of Europe was protected under US-UK leadership through NATO. Our defence, security and intelligence partnership with the US has been a cornerstone of UK foreign policy. When the facts change, we must pause and take stock. The harsh truth is that we can no longer rely on the US. It is time for the UK to lead within Europe and ensure that the brave Ukrainians are properly supported.

At a time when non-democratic states such as China, Russia, Iran and North Korea seek to menace and undermine democracies, the UK needs partners it can rely on and we cannot say that of Donald Trump. The issue is how to manage this situation. The Conservatives and Reform are currently engaged in an undignified squabble to show who can be the most sycophantic to Donald Trump. Meanwhile, Labour has gone cap in hand to plead with Trump to treat us nicely. On this, I agree with the hon. Members for Caerphilly (Chris Evans) and for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) that we must proceed from a position of strength.

The Conservatives, Reform and the Labour party fundamentally misunderstand that Trump is someone who believes that might is right and who scorns those who show weakness. We know that Donald Trump wants to be invited to make a state visit to the UK. If he wants to make our relationship transactional, we can do that too. The Prime Minister should make it clear that there will be no state visit unless or until Donald Trump commits to attending a summit on funding and equipping Ukraine to resist Russia's aggression. If Trump commits to defending Ukraine and talks about seizing the Russian assets held in the US, the UK and the EU so that we can fund Ukraine, then we can talk about a state visit.

The UK needs to strengthen our position in the face of Trump's bullying. We trade more than twice as much with our closest neighbours in the EU than we do with the US, and they share our immediate security threats—unlike the US, many of them are on the frontline of Putin's aggression. By showing leadership in European security, and opening negotiations on a new UK-EU customs union, the UK would show Donald Trump that we are serious about leading and will not bend to his threats.

**Sir John Hayes (in the Chair):** I call the shadow Minister.

3.35 pm

**Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper) on securing this important and timely debate.

[Wendy Morton]

Our bilateral relationship with the United States is one to be cherished. The shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), represented our party at President Trump's inauguration last month. We look forward with optimism to the opportunities presented by his election. However, both the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have made, shall we say, choice remarks about the President, so it is fortunate for the Government that our ties go beyond the simply political. The friendship and affinity between our two peoples and countries are profound and deep-rooted, manifesting in millions of interactions each and every day—from nearly £300 million in trade and co-operation of defence and security, to shared cultural values and a commitment to prosperity and freedom.

Our diplomatic ties bring all that together. As her posting in Washington comes to an end, I pay tribute to Dame Karen Pierce for her work as British ambassador to Washington. I had the pleasure of meeting Dame Karen when I was a Foreign Office Minister. This Friday will mark five years since her appointment, and she has served with distinction.

One area that is ripe for development is our trading relationship. When we were in government, our total trade with the United States grew from £123.5 billion in 2010 to £294.1 billion in the four quarters to the end of the third quarter of 2024. Labour could go further and get moving on a UK-US trade deal from which every part of the UK stands to benefit. The deal that the Conservative Government were drawing up with the last Trump Administration is sitting on the shelf. Will the Minister commit to seizing this golden opportunity and dusting off our free-trade deal? What discussions has the Minister had with colleagues in the Department for Business and Trade to get back to the negotiating table with President Trump and finish what we started?

In the absence of a full trade deal, do the Government have any plans to negotiate any new state-level agreements? In March last year, we signed a trade pact with Texas, which came just four months on from agreeing the UK-Florida memorandum of understanding. We also signed the Atlantic declaration in 2023. That declaration, and the accompanying action plan, forms the basis of an innovative partnership across the full spectrum of our trade relations. Will the Minister update us on what he and his colleagues have done since July to build on the Atlantic declaration and deliver on the action plan?

I will turn now to defence and security co-operation between the UK and the US, which is particularly crucial within NATO. We have a key role in influencing other member states to do more. We hosted the 2014 NATO summit and made the Wales pledge. That leadership was dearly needed at a time when Britain was one of only four countries to meet their defence spending targets. Today, we need to step up to the plate once again. The Conservative party went into the election with a full funded plan to increase spending to 2.5% of GDP by 2030. That was a serious and major financial commitment, but 2.5% should never be seen as an end state; rather, it is a further step on the road back to the sustained increase in defence investment that we need to fully upgrade our overall deterrence posture.

Our defence policy programme will look at how we deliver more resources to the military and ensure that more funding is well spent. We will always be prudent with the public finances, but our approach to defence will be fundamentally threat-driven, with a total focus on delivering a safe and secure United Kingdom. Sadly, we see that Labour is now wobbling on its 2.5% commitment. As I have said, this is not about the number, but about our influence. If Labour fails to show the leadership in NATO that we did, we will be vacating our role as key influences in the alliance.

Integral to our security partnership are the theatres in which we work closely with the United States, and one of the Government's first acts was to rush the Chagos islands out of the door at any price, undermining that partnership. We have been calling for weeks for the Government to wait for the new US Administration to give a view, instead of trying to force through a deal. I am pleased that they have finally conceded that they need a steer from President Trump before proceeding. Will the Minister now confirm what discussions the Government had with the new Administration in the lead-up to the inauguration?

We know that the Foreign Secretary spoke to the US Secretary of State and discussed Diego Garcia, so it is disappointing that we had to drag this fact out of the Government through written questions rather than the Government's being candid in their read-out, which did not mention Diego Garcia. What are the Government trying to hide? What exactly did the Foreign Secretary discuss with Secretary Rubio in respect of the Chagos islands? Will UK and US autonomy of operations on Diego Garcia be absolutely guaranteed, or have the Government offered complete sovereignty, as is being reported in the media this afternoon? If, at the end of the term of the treaty, we cannot extend the period during which we exercise sovereign rights on Diego Garcia, will the UK-US base have to be decommissioned? This failure of diplomacy has so far never failed to bewilder. Rather than flogging our strategic assets along with the kitchen sink, Labour should focus on strengthening our shared defence capabilities.

On China, it is difficult to reconcile the clear position of the United States with the this Government's approach. For all the Chancellor's kowtowing in Beijing, she returned with only £600 million over five years. Where was the China audit? I understand that work is under way, but it is not due to conclude until the spring. Did Foreign Office Ministers at least discuss the audit with the Chancellor before she set off? The response to my written parliamentary question today was, let us say, somewhat lacking in clarity. The read-out on gov.uk was murky, and instead of inviting real scrutiny, the Chancellor preferred to take questions from the state-run media of the Chinese Communist party, so perhaps the Minister can enlighten us as to what was actually discussed. We know that the new US Administration are particularly concerned about China's anti-competitive trade and economic practices. Which aspects of China's economic practices did the Chancellor raise concerns about in Beijing?

Hon. Members know that the root cause of so much of the suffering in the middle east is the Iranian regime. Through its support for Hamas, Hezbollah and, until its collapse, the Assad regime, Iran sows discord and misery. In April last year, we were in lock step with the United States in responding to Iran's destabilising activity,



including its direct attack on Israel. Through a co-ordinated package with the US, leading Iranian military figures were sanctioned, and we tightened the net on key actors in Iran's unmanned aerial vehicle and missile industries, further limiting its ability to destabilise the region. Will the Minister tell us how the Government plan to work with our allies, especially the US, on a robust strategy towards Iran? If our American allies reassert maximum pressure on Iran, will the Labour Government be prepared to harden our policy to support that work?

More broadly in the middle east, we all welcome the ceasefire deal that has been secured between Hamas and Israel, and we acknowledge the influence of President Trump in delivering that. It is so important that we work together with the US, Israel and Saudi Arabia to build on the Abraham accords, to ensure that we see a lasting peace in the region. Will the Minister ensure that the UK is absolutely plugged into those discussions and at the forefront, alongside the US?

On Ukraine, it is crucial that we continue to work extremely closely with the US, as we have since the very beginning of Russia's illegal invasion. American security is on the line in Ukraine, as are British and European security. We therefore need to face the ongoing challenges of that war together. Like others, we are keen to learn more about the specific policies that the new US Administration plan to pursue. We are proud of how we led on support to Ukraine and its people during our time in government. Can the Minister update us on discussions with the new Administration regarding Ukraine, and on what plans there are to continue to build on our considerable support?

To conclude, we have no closer ally than the United States. Over the past century, the essential partnership between our two nations has enabled us to lead on issues of global importance together. Our bilateral relationship is underpinned by deep ties between our people and civil societies, a thriving economic relationship, and the closest co-operation on defence and security. It is a friendship to be treasured, and we hope that the Government will take the necessary steps to strengthen it for years to come.

**Sir John Hayes (in the Chair):** Before I call the Minister, I ask that he finishes a couple of minutes before 4 pm to give Mr Cooper a chance to wind up the debate.

3.46 pm

**The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty):** It is good to see you in the Chair, Sir John. I know you are also a strong supporter of the UK-US relationship. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions, particularly the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper). I also extend my heartfelt condolences to the families of those who lost their lives in the tragic accidents in Washington DC and Pennsylvania in recent days. Our thoughts are with the American people and the people of those cities at this time. I also pay tribute to the emergency services for their dedicated work in such challenging conditions, as we saw after the terrible attacks in Las Vegas and New Orleans, and in the terrible forest fires in Los Angeles.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for securing the debate, and for his work on the Business and Trade Committee. He will not be surprised to hear that I did not agree with

all his comments, but there are some areas of agreement. I certainly agree with his characterisation of the very balanced trading relationship that we have with the United States; that point was also made by other Members on both sides of the House. I agree about some of the global threats that we must work on together, and about the fundamental values that bind us together in relation to defence, security and liberty. I gently say to him that there are no "toadying diplomats"; they are motivated by a great degree of duty and service, exemplified by Dame Karen Pierce, who will be retiring shortly from her role. I would take issue with him on that.

The partnership between the United Kingdom and the United States is strong and historic, and it is understandably of huge interest to Members of this House and the wider public. We have heard reference to the important role that BAPG and others play; many individual parliamentarians' links and histories are crucial to the relationship.

We will always do what is right for the British people, and a crucial part of that is a strong United Kingdom-US relationship. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) made powerful comments on that point. Our US links have a powerful role to play in delivering on many UK missions: ensuring long-term peace and security in the middle east, Europe and the Indo-Pacific; growing the economy in both our countries; delivering on security for our citizens; and propelling the tech revolution to achieve a sustainable and prosperous future for us all—to name just a few. This is a timely and important debate, and I am grateful for the many contributions. I will try my best to respond to them all.

We all recognise the extraordinary mandate that President Trump received from the American people in November. It was truly historic, as rightly emphasised by my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Steve Yemm). My hon. Friend was also right to talk about the challenges faced by the American people—indeed, his own constituents—in relation to growth in the economy, a matter that we are resolute in attempting to address as a Government. We see that election as an opportunity to engage with the United States with a renewed sense of energy, dynamism and purpose, and we have been forthright in extending our congratulations to President Trump on his victory. Indeed, the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary have reiterated their commitment to working closely with him and his Administration.

The Prime Minister spoke to the President on 26 January, and the warmth of their discussion demonstrated that the friendship between our countries is not restricted to any one political party or tradition; our relationship transcends them, as several hon. Members have rightly said. The Foreign Secretary, similarly, was delighted to speak to Secretary of State Marco Rubio on 27 January, and they expressed their eagerness to commence work together to address our many shared challenges, including the situation in the middle east, Russia's illegal war in Ukraine and the challenges posed by China. I pay tribute to President Trump's work on securing the ceasefire and the release of hostages, which was referred to in the debate.

**Wendy Morton:** Will the Minister give way?

**Stephen Doughty:** I will make some progress. I will try to come back to the right hon. Lady if I have time at the end, but a lot of points were made.

[Stephen Doughty]

The Foreign Secretary and Secretary of State Marco Rubio also reaffirmed our enduring commitment to the AUKUS partnership. Many Opposition Members rightly referred to the depth of our defence relationship, including the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp), who did so very aptly and whom I thank for his service. The depth of that relationship remains an essential pillar of our collective security.

In an increasingly unstable world, we agree that NATO should be strengthened and defence spending increased to adapt to new threats, which is why the Prime Minister has underlined our cast-iron commitment to spend 2.5% of GDP on defence. The UK looks forward to working with President Trump to ensure that our NATO alliance keeps Americans and Europeans safe, including in regions such as the Arctic. We will not tolerate attempts to disrupt critical infrastructure or restrict freedom of navigation by our adversaries. There is no global security without Arctic security. Alongside our closest allies, we are ready to support security in that region. That is one of the reasons I recently travelled there for the Arctic Circle Assembly.

Equally, as has been rightly mentioned, including by the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), our support for Ukraine is iron-clad. When the Prime Minister was in Kyiv last month, he saw at first hand the unrelenting aggression from Russia that Ukrainians face every day. As the PM said, the US has played a vital role alongside allies in supporting Ukraine. Our collective stance should be to help Ukraine to be in the strongest possible position in the months to come. I thank the shadow Minister and other right hon. and hon. Members for their support and comments on that.

A number of hon. Members have mentioned the British Indian Ocean Territory and I know many feel strongly about it. I advise them to take much of the reporting on that, especially regarding the finances, with a large pinch of salt. I will repeat what I have said in the House: the Government inherited a situation where the long-term future of the UK-US military base on Diego Garcia, which is so vital to UK and US security, was under threat. Finalising a deal means we can secure that base with strong protections, including from malign influence, that will allow the base to operate unchanged well into the next century. In close collaboration with the US—it is right that we give it time to consider—we will only agree to a deal that is in the UK's best interests and those of our allies, and that protects our collective national security.

**Wendy Morton:** Will the Minister give way on Chagos?

**Stephen Doughty:** I have answered many questions on Chagos. I am going to make progress, because I am conscious of the time.

Since taking office, the UK Government have shown strong international leadership on climate, and a steadfast commitment to the sustainable development goals. We remain committed to an impactful and reformed WHO. However, global issues require collective action, which is why the UK will continue to work with partners, including the US, our closest ally, to advance shared goals.

A lot of comments today rightly focused on the strength of our economic and trading partnership, which is a crucial pillar of our relationship. Strengthening that partnership with the US is a core component of the Government's growth mission. We only have to reflect on Robert Lighthizer's past statement that the Anglo-American trade relationship

"may be the healthiest...in the world"—

almost a decade later, the same can be said today.

Crucially, as has been said, I emphasise that we have a fair and balanced trading relationship that benefits both sides of the Atlantic. That relationship is worth more than £300 billion a year—nearly a fifth of all UK trade. We have more than a £1 trillion invested in each other's economies, and more than 1 million Americans work for UK-owned businesses, and the same the other way. Those relationships go far beyond London and Washington DC. We heard about the important relationship with Scotland and Scotch whisky, as outlined by the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway, who sponsored the debate. There are strong ties in my own community in Wales. We also heard about the strong ties with Northern Ireland.

From US defence manufacturing in Bedfordshire to the close to 50,000 jobs supported by UK companies in Vice-President Vance's home state of Ohio, the US is an extraordinarily dynamic economy with a huge amount of potential for the UK. Our countries share a determination to drive economic growth, which is the UK Government's core aim. We are committed to open and free trade, and its crucial role in delivering economic growth.

Although we might have a different philosophical approach to tariffs, we will continue to seize opportunities to boost trade with the US in a way that promotes growth, creates jobs and aligns with the UK's national interests. Indeed, we seek to strengthen relationships at all levels of the US economy, including with cities and states. I have had the pleasure of meeting many governors and lieutenant governors over the past few months to discuss that.

We are not going to choose between our allies, as the Prime Minister has said. It is not a case of either America or Europe. That is apparently my own family history, which I will come to later. We are inexorably bound together and face the same global threats and challenges. We have a strong will to overcome those together. Our national interest demands that we work with both, which is exactly what we will do.

I cannot end without reflecting on the vibrant links between the peoples of the United States and the United Kingdom. I am particularly proud, in that regard, of my own family ties to the United States, including my American grandfather, Harold, who fought in Europe in world war two. He came over from the Bronx in New York, in that strong tradition of service and duty that binds our two peoples together, including in the armed forces. My family history goes back to Pennsylvania in the 1700s, and I have many ties across the United States. I have visited 25 of the United States in my life, and counting. I am honoured to be the Minister with the responsibility for those relationships. As I said, those relationships exist across all of the United States and all parts of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

I am looking forward to marking the 250th anniversary of US independence next year, as well as the FIFA world cup, which will be hosted by Canada, Mexico and the US, not to mention the LA Olympics in 2028. Speaking of sports, the hon. Member for Dumfries and Galloway is, as he said, well aware of President Trump's deep affection for Scotland, with his mother having been born on the Isle of Lewis and with his golf resort Trump Turnberry. I have some family history in Kirkcudbrightshire in Scotland, and I studied at the University of St Andrews, another key Scottish golfing location.

The President's deep affection for our country and all its parts, as well as for our royal family, is well understood. We really welcome that affection and those special ties, which are another side of our special relationship. We also have incredible educational ties, including through the Marshall scholarship programme. I have met many of the Marshall scholars. We count a CIA director, five US ambassadors, two members of Congress, six Pulitzer prize winners, a NASA astronaut and a Nobel laureate among our Marshall alumni.

**Calum Miller:** Will the Minister give way?

**Stephen Doughty:** I am conscious of time, but I will very briefly give way.

**Calum Miller:** The Minister is giving a wonderful description of familial and other ties. Will he address the fact that the current US Administration are of a very different nature from previous ones, and can he tell us how the Government are addressing that change?

**Stephen Doughty:** As I said, we are going to focus on our common agendas globally: on growth, on defence, on security and on common prospects for our peoples. That is very much what this Government are focused on, and our relationship transcends all Administrations and all parties. That has been very clear under multiple Governments in the United States and the United Kingdom in the past.

I will take the opportunity to thank our consulates for their incredible work to promote strong ties across the United States. I also thank Dame Karen Pierce, as the shadow Minister did, for her tremendous leadership as ambassador to the US. It has been a pleasure to work with her and her team. She has done an outstanding job of nurturing the relationship over the last three years through the pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and, of course, our own elections.

Lord Mandelson, the next ambassador to the US, who I met just yesterday, will bring his extensive foreign and economic knowledge, strong business links and experience at the highest levels of Government, not least in trade, to the table. I know he will seize that new role with the same level of vigour, diligence and enthusiasm for our relationship as those who preceded him.

I conclude by saying that there is a vital and dynamic alliance between the United Kingdom and the US. We might not always agree on everything, but there is a huge amount on which we do agree. We all want our voters to feel the benefits of economic growth in their pockets. We want peace and security not just in the middle east, but in Europe and the Indo-Pacific, and globally. We want to harness the tech revolution for all our peoples.

Together, we will face those challenges. Our special relationship has endured, it continues to endure and it will endure; it is forged in blood, it is formed in common ideals and it is focused on the wellbeing and security of our citizens. It is a remarkable story, and long may it continue.

3.58 pm

**John Cooper:** I thank all the right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part today. I associate myself with the Minister's remarks about the aviation tragedies in America. Our hearts are with all those affected. It is clear from this debate that the strength of our relationship with America matters a great deal to us.

I want to pick up on one or two Members' contributions. I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), who told us that the birds and the bees have, apparently, been upgraded to the rhinos and the sloths. I shall resist saying too much about Orangemen, but it suffices to say that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is not, I suspect, a fan of fake tan.

I also thank my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp). He knows, better than most of us, the importance of immediate action. We must take that message away when we consider defence spending. We need to urgently see where we are with that.

I conclude by saying that the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) might take the message to America that we are not junior partners. Rather than us becoming the 51st state of the USA, the United States might, in fact, like to come back in under the furlled umbrella of the British empire.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the UK-US bilateral relationship.



## Children in Care

4 pm

**John Whitby** (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government policy on children in care.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I asked for this debate because we as parliamentarians must maintain the focus on children the state is responsible for. I have been a foster carer for 25 years, a member of an adoption panel for a decade and a lead member of a tier 1 local authority, and I have seen the pressures build at the same time as resources and support have declined. The number of children in care has increased by 28% since 2010, and the number of children in residential care has increased by 102% since 2010, so the question is: what has caused these huge spikes? Of course, there are various factors and no consensus view; it would only be fair to say that the number of unaccompanied asylum seekers in care has more than doubled in that period.

For me, there are two main factors. First, the significant rise in poverty that started during austerity, coupled with a housing crisis, has pushed more families to the brink. A report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that approximately 3.8 million people experienced destitution in 2022.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. I spoke to him beforehand and told him a lovely story from Northern Ireland that reminds me of the goodness of this world. A man from Northern Ireland, who was a foster child, set up a company called Madlug, which makes fashionable and good-quality bags. The idea is that for every bag purchased, another bag is given to a child in care for them to carry their personal possessions. The dignity that gives is admirable. Does the hon. Member agree that companies that seek to improve the self-worth and dignity of children should be encouraged and supported?

**John Whitby**: I recognise that children go to placements with plastic bags, and it is heartbreaking. What a fabulous thing the hon. Member has raised.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that approximately 3.8 million people experienced destitution in 2022, including approximately 1 million children—nearly triple the number in 2017.

The second factor was the withdrawal of universal early help. Sure Start was withdrawn at different speeds and to differing degrees around the country, as local authorities removed their discretionary spending due to a loss of revenue support from the previous Government. It went from being a universal service to a targeted one. The spending on early help is now £1.8 billion a year less than it was in 2010. Here is the kicker: we are now spending more on children's residential placements than we are on early help.

Early help did exactly what it said on the tin: it provided parents with health and wellbeing support, parenting advice, childcare and learning, and support for children with special needs. There were benefits to social care and to health. Indeed, an Institute for Fiscal Studies study found that Sure Start prevented so many children from being hospitalised that it saved the NHS

the equivalent of a third of the entire Sure Start budget. The IFS also stated that Sure Start almost certainly delivered benefits significantly greater than its cost.

**Alistair Strathern** (Hitchin) (Lab): My hon. Friend is giving a moving account of the structural factors that underpin the rise in personal trauma that has led to more children in the care system. Those placed in the formal care system get access to therapeutic support directly, whereas those placed with kinship carers do not have the same level of support, often because of anomalies in how they are treated. Does my hon. Friend agree that now is a good time to review the level of therapeutic support available to those in kinship care, who might have experienced exactly the same personal trauma as those in the more formal care system?

**John Whitby**: I do agree. It appears as though the Government are expanding the services available to children in kinship care, and that sounds like a good thing. I would like every child in care to have therapeutic support, because they all need it. They have all been massively traumatised by something.

The next question is: why has the number of residential placements increased so much faster than the number of children in care? The answer is simple: the number of foster families has remained fairly flat in the same period, despite the significant efforts of authorities and independent fostering agencies to attract new carers.

**Rachel Gilmour** (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): Some time ago, I worked in international development roles, including with former orphanage children in eastern bloc countries in the former Soviet Union, such as Bulgaria, Romania and Moldova, and it was abundantly clear then that children are better off raised in families. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we should be doing much more to support fostering and adoption processes, without losing our grip on safeguarding practices?

**John Whitby**: I obviously want children to stay in the family network as much as possible. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill supports that with family group decision making and the kinship care offer, so hopefully more children will stay within the familial network, which is better for them and for the state.

The previous Government introduced a couple of positive innovations on fostering. They came quite late in their term and were not extended to all areas, but they are worth pursuing. First, they introduced regionalisation. Derby, Derbyshire, Nottingham and Nottinghamshire have combined along East Midlands combined county authority lines to form Foster for East Midlands, which creates a combined and increased marketing resource. The results are positive, especially against the backdrop of UK-wide fostering inquiry numbers falling.

In preparation for this debate, I did the obligatory Google search for "fostering in Derbyshire" to replicate what a potential new foster carer might find online, and I am afraid Foster for East Midlands was the fifth hit after four sponsored ads. The ability for independents to outspend even combined local authority budgets should not be a surprise, given the significant cost of independent placements compared with local authority placements. The reality is that the taxpayer is paying for them to outspend local authorities.

The other recent positive innovation is Mockingbird. One of the most cited reasons for foster carers leaving the role is the lack of support. It is easy for new foster carers to feel isolated, given the nature of the role. Mockingbird puts a constellation of new carers around an experienced foster carer, who will guide and support them, and enables the building of support networks among the carers.

If we cannot get enough new foster carers into the system, we need to ensure that the ones we have do not leave unnecessarily. That support means fewer placement breakdowns and less disruption in children's lives.

**Tulip Siddiq** (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech based on his personal experience. He talks about the importance of support, and I want to talk about the importance of advocacy services that advise children on their rights when they receive social care services. Advocacy can be transformative to the lives of children, but the Children's Commissioner found that many children do not receive support from an advocate, despite being referred by their local authority. Does my hon. Friend agree that if we are trying to protect the most vulnerable, which he is clearly passionate about, a good starting point is to prioritise advocates so that children feel like they are being listened to?

**John Whitby:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that the voice of the child is key at every step of the way. We must listen to children, so advocacy is entirely fundamental.

For full disclosure, I should say that I have not received fostering allowances since last May, as I have been busy doing other things, so I have nothing to gain by saying this, but the 32% of local authorities that pay allowances below the national minimum allowance will not attract new foster carers based on altruism alone. Foster carers need a reasonable amount of remuneration, like anyone else.

The result of more children needing foster care without a corresponding number of extra foster carers is a crisis in placement sufficiency, which means more children in highly expensive residential placements, in many cases a great distance from their home town.

**John Milne** (Horsham) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for securing this very important debate. In my Horsham constituency, a family has approached me who are kinship carers for their grandson. They feel they are discriminated against in a system that gives more resources and attention to children in care than to kinship carers. Given the shortage of places in foster care, does the hon. Member agree that we need to do everything we can to balance up the support that kinship carers receive?

**John Whitby:** Unsurprisingly, I definitely agree with the hon. Member: of course we need to support children in kinship care. I am sure the Minister will talk about kinship care as well, and I am glad to say that part of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill requires local authorities to make an offer on kinship care, which is very positive.

As I was saying, a lack of foster care places means more children in highly expensive residential placements, in many cases a great distance from their home town. There is a very good chance that they will end up in the

north-west, because that is where a quarter of children's homes are located. Of course, some children need to be placed away from familiar surroundings, but not on this scale. It is great that the Government are looking to address this issue through the planning process, so that care homes can more easily be created where they are needed. Personally, I would like to see a focus on smaller homes, because they feel less institutionalised and are easier to integrate into the community.

The cost of some residential children's home placements is extraordinary, and it is one of the factors pushing councils ever closer to section 104 notices. The cost of looked-after children has risen from £3.1 billion in 2009-10 to £7 billion in 2022-23.

**Shaun Davies** (Telford) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech, giving us great insight into his experience both as a foster carer and as a lead member. A recent survey by the National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum found that 77% of children with experience of care struggle to afford food, and three quarters said that the cost of living crisis has damaged their mental health. Does he agree that this issue requires a cross-Government, cross-agency and cross-sector approach, as well as learning from the best in the sector, including my own local council, Telford and Wrekin council, which only last year was recognised as a national leader for its work in this space?

**John Whitby:** All of government and all councils need to do more. They need to understand that we need to do more for children in care to create a level playing field, because they have such difficult issues to overcome. I completely agree with my hon. Friend.

In the same period that the cost of children in care went up to £7 billion, local councils' overall core funding went down by 9% in real terms. The Government are absolutely right to introduce a financial oversight scheme, because some providers have made excessive profits. It was widely reported that the 20 largest national providers of children's placements collectively made profits of £310 million in 2021-22.

Of course, we must focus on outcomes for children in care, which are historically and currently very poor. In 2018-19, just 6.8% of children in care received a grade 5 or above in English and maths, compared with 43.2% of all children. In turn, that explains why just 22% of care leavers aged 27 are in employment. Even when they are in employment, there is a £6,000 pay gap between care leavers and those in the general population. It would be easy to blame educators or the care sector for the problem, but the reality is that these children have suffered some sort of significant trauma in their lives. Whether that is neglect, abuse or something else, it is never good.

**Chris Bloore** (Redditch) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this important subject to Westminster Hall. He mentioned the impact that being in care has on many children. He is probably aware that nearly one third of children in kinship care—just over 31%—have diagnosed or suspected social, emotional or mental health needs. Although we recognise and congratulate the Government on their announcement for kinship carers in the recent Budget, we must also ensure that we make the tools available to children and families to get the mental health support that they need.

**John Whitby:** There is clearly a theme here. I am sure the Minister will address the growing consensus that kinship care needs the support that children in care receive.

Children are bound to be impacted by the problems they have experienced. That is not to say that we accept poor results; it is just to put them in context. The statistics show that children who have been in care for longer than 12 months receive better grades than those who have been in care for less than 12 months. That makes sense to me, because the longer they are in care, the longer they have stability in their home lives and a focus on education from their foster carers or residential care workers. It is also worth saying that in my experience, the virtual school is a real positive for the child. That is supported by the fact that persistent absence from school, which has been a national issue since covid, is actually better among the cohort of children in care than the overall school population.

With more children, less money and a placement sufficiency crisis, we need to put much more focus on keeping families together and children out of care wherever it is possible and safe to do so. Mandating local authorities to offer family group decision making is a big step forward. The evidence shows that that prevents a significant number of children from going into care in the first place, and keeps them out of care going forward. Following on from family group decision making, the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill will require all councils to publish a kinship offer, as we have heard, so that more children can stay in more familiar surroundings. Those children will be further supported by the virtual school.

On the subject of the virtual school, and with corporate parenting in mind, I encourage the Government to consider taking up the recommendation of the Education Committee to give virtual school heads statutory powers over the process of school allocation. On the subject of corporate parenting, we need to be conscious that this is everyone's responsibility, and all Government Departments should consider how they can give that bit extra for children in care. When children have left care, we need to go on supporting them. Through Staying Close, young people leaving residential care will be afforded that bit of extra support to keep them in their property or in education, or to support their general wellbeing. Staying Close is another scheme that is bearing fruit, and I am glad it will be expanded by the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill. There are many positives to take from the Bill, and just seven months into the new Administration, it is a big step forward.

I will finish almost where I started, with early help. The previous Government introduced, in some areas, family hubs, which provide universal early help from pregnancy onwards. The early signs are very encouraging, and I ask the Minister and the Secretary of State to consider extending the programme as soon as possible. It is the ultimate example of investing to save. Prevention is better than cure, and it is also cheaper.

4.19 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby):** It is a privilege to speak with you in the Chair, Sir John. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (John Whitby) on securing a debate on this important subject, and I thank hon. Members for their interventions. I will attempt to respond to as many as possible in the time that I have.

I know that this subject is close to my hon. Friend's heart, because he has been a foster carer for many years; as a former children and families social worker and fostering manager, it is close mine, too. I am delighted and proud to be part of a Government who are making such a difference for children in care. I thank all foster carers for the care that they provide to foster children across our country.

Children in care are among the most vulnerable in our society. My hon. Friend is correct that the number of children in care has increased year on year since 2010, under the previous Government. The problems facing the children's care system were set out in a 2022 review led by my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), and the Competition and Markets Authority also reported on failings in the children's social care market that year. Both called for radical action. This Government inherited a broken care system that is failing too many children, despite the heroic efforts of social workers, carers and all those who champion children's outcomes.

We are taking action. Since the election, we have announced funding in the Budget to enable more children to stay in family-centred environments, including the largest ever national investment in kinship care of £40 million. We have also published a policy statement with ambitious plans to reform children's social care and focus the system towards early help for families.

**Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD):** On the point about early intervention and prevention, I thank the Minister for agreeing to visit Sussex later this year to meet me and an organisation called Pause, which works with mothers who have had a child taken into care. It works across a number of local authorities but by no means all, and I hope that the Government will look favourably upon its work and enable more funding to support it in more areas.

**Janet Daby:** I thank the hon. Member for that intervention and I look forward to visiting Sussex.

In the local government finance settlement, we announced two grants that will double settlement investment in preventive children's services to over £500 million in 2025-26. We have introduced legislation to underpin our reforms, in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill. The actions we plan to take do not stop there: we have a vision to improve services for children in care and we are on that journey.

Foster carers offer crucial support to some of the most vulnerable children in our society. They provide love, stability and compassion to children and young people when they need it most. We recognise that there are sufficiency challenges in foster care and we want to recruit more foster carers, so that foster care is available for more children who need it, in the places where they live. On that point, I say to anybody listening to the debate who is interested in becoming a foster carer: please do contact your local authority children's services.

In the autumn Budget, we announced an additional £15 million to expand the fostering recruitment and retention programme. My Department is currently supporting two thirds of local authorities across England in 10 regional hubs. The extra funding will expand our approach to ensure that every local authority has access to that support. The regional hubs support foster carers



from their first inquiry through to providing a retention model. Our aim is to boost the number of approvals among those who apply to become foster carers, and take further steps to retain those who we have. I note the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales about the need to retain foster carers and I absolutely agree with him.

No foster carer should be financially disadvantaged because of their fostering role. We expect all foster carers to receive at least the weekly national minimum allowance, in addition to any agreed expenses, to cover the full cost of caring for each child placed with them. In January, local authorities were sent a letter to remind them of their duty to provide the national minimum allowance and to notify them of the latest 3.55% uplift. Fostering service providers can choose to pay above the minimum allowance or to pay additional fees. Qualifying care relief, a tax relief, is also available to support foster carers. The threshold for the relief has been raised in recent years to ensure that the vast majority of foster carers will not pay tax on their care income. We encourage fostering service providers to adhere to the foster care charter, which sets out clear principles for how foster carers should be treated and recognises their invaluable work.

For most children in care, foster care is the best option when they cannot live in kinship arrangements. Kinship care, which has been mentioned by Members across the Chamber, is an area where the Government are investing. We recognise that for some young people, kinship care is absolutely where they need to be, and that kinship carers need support to enable them to care for their children. We announced £90 million of capital funding in the autumn Budget to fund new places in children's homes and to secure children's homes.

We are using that money in two ways. First, we are providing funding to maintain existing provision and expand capacity across both secure and open children's homes. That will provide 180 additional open children's home placements by late 2025. It will also help local authorities to support our most vulnerable children accommodated in specialist care in secure children's homes, including continuing plans to create two brand-new secure homes in London and the west midlands. We recognise that we need a variation of care dependent on the care needs of the child.

Secondly, we are taking action to provide increased provision specifically for children with multiple complex needs who have been, or are at risk of being, deprived of

their liberty. For such children, their needs will be a response to complex ongoing trauma. We have invited local authorities to bid for new capital funding to build 200 new places in local authority children's homes. Local authorities and health partners will be encouraged to work together to deliver suitable packages of care and plans to support these young people. Alongside that, the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill will create a new statutory mechanism that allows children with complex needs to be placed in safe, flexible and secure community-based provision that keeps children safe. All young people should receive consistently high-quality care. To improve the quality of children's homes, the Bill will strengthen Ofsted's powers to hold provider groups to account where there are quality issues.

The current children's social care placement market is dysfunctional. It is not delivering enough safe, loving homes for children in the right parts of the country at a sustainable cost to the taxpayer. As has been mentioned, some councils are on the brink of bankruptcy, in part due to the rising cost of spending on children in care, while some providers are making excess profits despite sometimes providing sub-par care for our most vulnerable children. The Government are clear that profiteering from vulnerable children in care is absolutely unacceptable, and we are committed to stamping it out where it occurs in the children's social care market.

We are introducing a package of measures to fix this. The measures will rebalance the market and improve competition, regulation and the commissioning of placements. They will shine a light on the levels of profit being made and bring greater visibility to the prices that local authorities are paying. The measures, which are in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, form a key part of our strategy to address the problems of the market.

I am enormously grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales for speaking so eloquently and passionately about children in care, his experiences and the many issues to do with children's social care. This subject means a great deal to him, as it does to me and to our Government. We need to get this right. There is a lot to do. I acknowledge the dedication that he has shown in his working life. Our opportunity mission is focused on breaking the link between children's backgrounds and their success. I am determined to support and to improve the life chances of children in care, and this Government have an ambitious plan.

*Question put and agreed to.*

## Accessibility of Radiotherapy

4.31 pm

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the accessibility of radiotherapy.

It is a great honour to serve under your guidance, Sir John, and it is a great privilege to have the opportunity to raise the issue of the accessibility of radiotherapy on World Cancer Day.

Three quarters of those in my communities in Westmorland live dangerously too far from radiotherapy treatment. It has been my privilege over the years to drive a number of my constituents to the Rosemere centre at Preston to get treatment, and I am always struck by the quality of the treatment and the warmth and professionalism of the staff, but also by the gruelling impact on my constituents, on whom the daily lengthy journeys take a terrible toll.

**Daisy Cooper** (St Albans) (LD): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way so early in his speech. He mentioned travel times. Travel times to radiotherapy for my constituents in St Albans and Hertfordshire would certainly be much reduced if the relocation of the Mount Vernon cancer centre to Watford General could proceed, and the only way for that to happen is if the new hospital programme goes ahead sooner than is currently planned. Would he agree with me that shortening the travel time would provide a much better service for local residents?

**Tim Farron**: Yes, I absolutely do agree with my hon. Friend. Travel times, which I will come on to in a moment, do have an impact on outcomes—in other words, whether people survive—because there is an impact on the extent to which a person will be referred for treatment depending on how close they are to the nearest site. What she says is absolutely right, especially for her communities.

For my constituents, the two, three or in some cases four-hour round trip to the excellent but distant Rosemere cancer unit at Preston is not just inconvenient, but debilitating and cruel. It means that many do not complete their treatment, and many choose not even to start such treatment. Some do not even get referred for radiotherapy in the first place, because clinicians understandably conclude that the patient is not strong enough to cope with the rigours of travelling such distances so frequently. For us in Westmorland, longer journeys mean shorter lives.

**Steff Aquarone** (North Norfolk) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing such an important debate, especially on World Cancer Day. In my constituency of North Norfolk, Radiotherapy UK found that nobody can access radiotherapy treatment within 75 minutes by public transport. Does he agree that we need a two-pronged approach to tackle this—to fix our broken public transport infrastructure and to make more services available closer to where people are, such as at Cromer hospital in my constituency?

**Tim Farron**: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. Back at the time of the last Labour Government, the national radiotherapy advisory group recommended that it was bad practice for anybody to live beyond

45 minutes of a radiotherapy centre one-way, or a round trip of an hour and a half, yet so many people—7.5 million people—including his constituents and my constituents, live beyond that.

**Anna Sabine** (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): On that specific point, I do not want to show off about who has the worst travel times for radiotherapy, but nobody in my constituency of Frome and East Somerset who does not own a car lives within that recommended 45-minute NHS travel time. Does my hon. Friend agree that reliable, quick and affordable public transport is key, and that the recent increase to the bus fare cap has not helped with the situation?

**Tim Farron**: Yes. By definition, almost all of the radiotherapy deserts—those places that are beyond sensible and safe travelling times—are rural communities. As a result, they have terrible public transport. It is not just about the cost. The increase in the bus fare cap is hugely damaging, but for many of our communities—my hon. Friend's and mine alike—it almost does not matter what the bus cap is; if there is no bus to spend the fare on, people are stuffed, really. That has a huge impact on their cancer outcomes, which means whether they survive or not.

**Rachel Gilmour** (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): Could the reason that radiotherapy is used in only 35% of cases, rather than 50% of cases, be that local transport just does not exist to take people to have the treatments that they need?

**Tim Farron**: My hon. Friend makes a good point. There is a combination of reasons, which I will come on to in a moment, but distance from treatment is undoubtedly the critical point that decides whether people can access and take advantage of lifesaving and life-prolonging treatment.

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

**Tim Farron**: I feel that the hon. Member has a point to make.

**Jim Shannon**: First, I commend the hon. Member for championing this issue for all the years I have known him in this House. He deserves credit for that, he has got this debate in Westminster Hall today, and we are looking to the Minister for a response. Does the hon. Member agree that the issue goes more widely, and is also about recruitment? Training and retention of clinical oncologists is needed, with only seven in 10 training places filled in 2024. Does he agree that there is a way forward—bursaries for students, which could begin to fill the training needs in the long term? Students would understand that they will not live under the burden of student debt if they pick a career for life—in other words, help them with a bursary and the NHS will have them forever.

**Tim Farron**: I completely agree with the hon. Member. Many people watching the debate today, whether physically in the Gallery or on television outside, are part of that outstanding workforce, and we are massively grateful to them. What a career for someone to be in, where you are saving lives every day and alleviating pain. That is a wonderful thing, yet there are not enough of them. The workforce is part of the solution, as well as the challenge, to the problem that we face.

For us in Westmorland, longer journeys mean shorter lives. The answer is clear for us in Westmorland, and that is to build a satellite radiotherapy unit at the Westmorland general hospital in Kendal as part of the Rosemere unit, following the model of the many excellent satellite units around the UK. The number of cancer patients travelling from south Cumbria each year for radiotherapy provides demand for at least one linear accelerator at the Westmorland general hospital. If the experience of other new satellite centres around the country is replicated, such as at the new Hereford site, which is a satellite of Cheltenham, a satellite centre in Kendal would attract at least 20% more patients than existing demand, because people who would not have had radiotherapy treatment at all beforehand would now be able to access it, simply because it is closer to them. That a satellite unit in Kendal has not already happened is an indictment of the lack of responsiveness to the obvious need from NHS England, and of a lack of concern for cancer patients and their families who live in rural communities.

**Sorcha Eastwood** (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): I commend the hon. Member for his advocacy on this subject over a long time. The satellite centres are one thing. I represent Northern Ireland and my constituency of Lagan Valley, and I note that there are people in the Gallery involved in the All-Island Cancer Research Institute. Does he agree that geography is important and that cancer knows no boundaries, so our efforts to tackle it should also know no boundaries?

**Tim Farron:** The hon. Member makes wonderful points, and it is absolutely right that in every corner of the United Kingdom we need to ensure that we have the staffing, the kit and the level of technology to meet need close enough to where people live for people to be kept safe and treated in a convenient way.

In Westmorland, we successfully campaigned to bring chemotherapy, greater amounts of surgery and a new diagnostic hub to Kendal. All of that is welcome, and all of that has saved lives. I am unbelievably grateful to all those in our communities who campaigned alongside us, and to the wonderful NHS professionals who deliver and run those services, but the failure of successive Governments, including the one I was a part of, and NHS management to take the people of Westmorland out of the radiotherapy desert is utterly inexcusable given the multiple opportunities to do so over the last 30 or so years.

So my first ask of the Minister is that he takes a personal interest in the call for a satellite radiotherapy unit at the Westmorland general hospital in Kendal, and that he meets with me and with oncologists, commissioners and patients, to kickstart that bid.

**Adam Dance** (Yeovil) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that we must also do more to help local groups providing clinical and non-clinical support for radiotherapy patients after treatment, such as the Macmillan radiotherapy late effects service and the Cancer Connect group in my constituency of Yeovil?

**Tim Farron:** My hon. Friend makes a great point and does a great service to his community by standing up for those groups who support people after cancer, and their families. I know that personally in my own family, so I congratulate him on making a really important point.

My second ask—the Minister should be delighted to hear that I only have two—is that he separately meets with the all-party group on radiotherapy and the leading fantastic clinicians who support us, to look at how the Government and NHS England can turn the tide on radiotherapy nationwide, because the problems of access do not just affect Westmorland; they affect the whole country.

Although in Westmorland our issue is unacceptable distance from services, the problem across the country is that we lack sufficient capacity, lack up-to-date technology, and lack an effective workforce plan. Britain is behind our neighbours on the number of radiotherapy machines, and we are behind our neighbours in how advanced that machinery is. In France, for example, there are twice as many linear accelerators per head as we have in the United Kingdom. Across the OECD, roughly 9% of cancer budgets are spent on radiotherapy; in the UK we spend a paltry 5%. One in two of us will have cancer at some point, and one in two people with cancer should have radiotherapy—to be precise, 53% of us should—yet only 35% of cancer patients in the UK had radiotherapy as their primary treatment. In fact, the regional variation in access to radiotherapy ranges from the lowest of only 29.8%—by the way, that is in my constituency—up to 50%.

There are shocking variations based on tumour type, too. Only 11% of lung cancer patients in some regions receive radiotherapy, compared with 43% in other regions. Only 18% of rectal cancer patients receive radiotherapy in some areas, compared with 62% in others. People's chances of surviving should not depend on their postcode. Inadequate and inequitable radiotherapy capacity is costing lives. Over the past decade, more than 500,000 patients have waited more than two months for their first cancer treatment. Yet the chilling reality is that for every four weeks of delay in treatment we have a 10% reduction in our chances of surviving.

The Royal College of Radiologists reminds us that in 2024 only 38% of patients starting radiotherapy did so within two months of an urgent referral for cancer. The national target is 85%. Let us compare that with other forms of cancer treatment: 68% of patients had surgery for their cancer in that time, and 64% started chemotherapy within that two months. That means that over 10,000 patients requiring radiotherapy received their treatment after the recommended timeframe. In 2023 some 92% of cancer centres reported delays in patients starting radiotherapy. That is one of the main reasons why the UK is near the bottom of the OECD cancer outcome rankings, which is a sanitised way of saying that people with cancer in Britain are more likely to die sooner than in other equivalent countries. So longer journeys mean shorter lives, and longer waiting times also mean shorter lives.

**Alex Easton** (North Down) (Ind): Thank you, Sir John, for your chairmanship today. In Northern Ireland, one in two people who need radiotherapy do not get it at an early stage. Does the hon. Member agree that a strong focus on awareness and early diagnosis is needed?

**Tim Farron:** That is a good point. Early diagnosis is vital. We are getting a bit better at it, but it would be a tragedy if we diagnosed people but then did not treat them early enough to cure them. The hon. Gentleman makes a good point on behalf of his communities.



[Tim Farron]

If we cannot cope with treating the number of cancer patients we are seeing now, how will we deal with the projected 30% increase in cancer cases by 2040? The good news—the very, very good news—is that it does not need to be this way. The upcoming cancer plan, of which we have heard an outline today, is an opportunity to supercharge cancer services and transform a culture of normalising unacceptable delays into one that drives continuous cancer care improvements. However, without decisive and radical action and leadership, lives will continue to be lost needlessly.

**Torcuil Crichton** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I was very struck by the hon. Gentleman's comment about longer journeys meaning shorter lives. There is no competition on journeys, of course, but my constituents in Na h-Eileanan an Iar and the Western Isles face some of the longest journeys in Britain to get cancer treatment, outwith and within the constituency. Somebody from Barra, for example, faces a three-day journey to Stornoway by boat, taxi and aeroplane for therapy and then a return journey over three days. I hope that that can be changed by sending people directly to Glasgow or, perhaps even better, by implementing a public service order to restore flights between one end of the island and the other. I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate and for his very telling comment about longer journeys meaning shorter lives.

**Tim Farron:** I am extraordinarily fond of the hon. Gentleman's constituency, which he represents well. He makes an important point about travel times. In some parts of my constituency, people need to take a ferry to get from one place to another, but it is not quite as common as in his constituency.

At the heart of the radical, lifesaving transformation that we need through the cancer plan must be the elevation of the unsung hero, the Cinderella of our cancer services: radiotherapy. Lord Darzi found that 30% of patients are waiting more than 31 days for radical radiotherapy. As the incidence of cancer grows, the urgent need for quicker and more efficient treatments such as radiotherapy is only increasing.

As things stand, the replacement and updating of linear accelerators is left to the 52 separate cancer units in England—52 separate procurement operations, 52 different finance officers trying to balance the books and 52 different heads of service all trying to meet increasing demand, often without the time and space to look beyond the horizon. It is time, then, to centralise the commissioning of the technology to ensure a constant focus on updating and expanding radiotherapy. That would immediately start saving lives everywhere.

Radiotherapy UK estimates that simply replacing all the out-of-date LINACs could free up 87,000 additional appointments every single year. Modern radiotherapy is quicker and more accurate than other treatment. It is also by far the cheapest, costing between £3,000 and £7,000 per patient—several times less expensive than equivalent cancer treatments. The Government's £70 million commitment to radiotherapy services was welcome, but in reality, as the Minister says, that money would cover the cost of only 26 LINAC machines, fewer than half

the number that are currently operating beyond their sell-by date. Erratic one-off rounds of funding do not address the need for a sustainable rolling programme of machine replacement to enable planning, support procurement and improve access for patients. Even the new machines are often old technology. What a terrible waste.

In my years of campaigning on this matter, I have found that radiotherapy lacks funding and prominence. Britain therefore lags behind our neighbours, so people tragically die when they do not need to—all because of a lack of leadership and drive from the centre. On more than one occasion, I have almost seen the penny drop on the faces of Ministers of all parties when it comes to our failure on radiotherapy, but every time so far, I have seen that zeal founder on the rocks of bureaucratic sluggishness, indifference and resistance to change within the NHS. If they show the leadership that we desperately need, the Minister and the Secretary of State will have the enthusiastic and active support of the all-party parliamentary group on radiotherapy, and of the army of outstanding clinicians who are out there saving lives.

Professor Mike Richards is a name that many people remember. He was the cancer tsar in the early noughties, under the previous Labour Government; he did great work and his achievements were tangible. If the Government will forgive me for using shorthand, we basically need a Mike Richards for radiotherapy, and we need them, like, yesterday. Failing that, tomorrow morning would just about do. Every day we delay, my constituents—as well as yours, Sir John, and those of the Minister and of all Members present—are dying unnecessarily.

We need new technology as we plan treatments, too. Last May, £15.5 million was announced for AI technology that would save clinicians time and reduce radiotherapy waiting lists. However, we have heard from cancer units around the country that this funding may be withdrawn or diverted, which would be a hammer blow to trusts in the face of the ongoing workforce crisis. Will the Minister take the chance today to reassure our cancer units and confirm that this funding will go, as promised, to radiotherapy departments in full? I hope the Minister will also act swiftly to tackle the perversities of the tariff payments for radiotherapy, which effectively punish trusts for treating cancer patients in the most effective and modern ways.

I ask the Minister to guarantee that radiotherapy will be at the centre of the NHS 10-year cancer plan, and that that plan will be led by people empowered and determined to deliver it. The technology is vital, but the people matter just as much. Our specialist and highly skilled radiotherapy workforce numbers only 6,400 people, yet the survey conducted by Radiotherapy UK shows that one in five cancer doctors may leave the profession in the next five years. We have a 15% shortage in clinical oncologists—set to rise to 21% by the end of this Parliament—and 30% of oncologist training posts were vacant last year. On top of that, 50% of clinical technologists are over 50 years old, and 84% of heads of cancer services reported that they were concerned that workforce shortages affected the quality of patient care.

I ask the Minister to agree that the 10-year cancer plan will include a renewed investment in workforce and infrastructure. A 10-year vision already exists, by the way—drawn up by the experts, via Radiotherapy

UK. I simply urge the Minister to consider their findings and borrow the proposals detailed by leading oncologists and cancer experts.

I have asked for two separate meetings today. The first is on the need for a satellite radiotherapy unit at Kendal; the second is a first meeting for the Minister with the all-party parliamentary group on radiotherapy, to look at the national picture. I hope he will grant me both.

The radiotherapy lobby is tiny: 6,400 dedicated professionals within our health service; a compact but awesome group of charities and volunteers; a handful of companies building the technology, many of which are based in the United Kingdom; England's captain fantastic, Bryan Robson; and a small band of MPs of all parties, seeking to be a voice not just for the radiotherapy sector, but for the thousands and thousands of people living with cancer in our country, who deserve the best treatment that we can give them. For the last generation or more, the UK has let those people down, and so often with tragic consequences. Yet radiotherapy is a cost-effective, easily deliverable technology that will save lives in every community in this country.

We are way behind where we need to be, yet it would be so easy, with the right leadership from Ministers, to catch up with and go beyond our neighbours. Cancer no longer needs to be seen as a death sentence; it is a disease that can be treated and cured, but we cannot do that if our systems and practices prevent us from deploying the best treatments available. Please save lives, Minister, and become our radiotherapy champion.

**Sir John Hayes (in the Chair):** This is a short debate. I intend to call the first Front-Bench speaker at 5.08 pm.

4.53 pm

**Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for securing this debate and for his dedication on this issue. I declare an interest as a governor of the Royal Berkshire hospital. I also have a family member who has shares in a medical company.

Radiotherapy access suffers from geographical constraints, and this issue cannot be solved until the significant workforce challenge is addressed alongside it. The Royal College of Radiologists states that in England the NHS faces a 30% shortfall in radiologists. That figure is projected to rise to 40% by 2028, yet more than a fifth of NHS trusts have implemented recruitment freezes. Shortfalls in recruitment mean that consultants, faced with burnout and impossible workloads, retire earlier. That is made especially clear as the average age of retirement is just 54.

The Royal College of Radiologists highlights the absurd situation whereby newly trained consultants may struggle to find jobs, forcing invaluable radiologists and oncologists to go for locum jobs, move abroad or leave the healthcare sector altogether at a time when their skills are best placed in our NHS to fix our cancer care crisis—a crisis in which not a single integrated care board is currently meeting its cancer waiting time standards.

The impact of the recruitment freezes on patients is tangible and is not limited to radiotherapy. Some 80% of patient pathways in the NHS are reliant on radiology.

Delays in scan reporting result in delayed treatment. Delayed treatment results in worse outcomes. Worse outcomes may be the deciding factor in whether someone fails to recover.

How will the Government ensure that when my Wokingham constituents visit the Royal Berkshire hospital, the oncology and screening departments are fully staffed? Can the Minister explain his understanding of the recruitment freezes that are taking place across NHS trusts? I am aware that the Minister has a very, very busy diary: he told me so earlier today in the main Chamber.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Andrew Gwynne):** I suspect that my diary will be a little busier with the two requests from the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron).

**Clive Jones:** The Minister's diary will be a little busy, but I am sure it can cope. I ask him to meet me and representatives of the Royal College of Radiologists to discuss the Government's plan for workforce reform.

**Sir John Hayes (in the Chair):** I am delighted to be able to call the Front-Bench spokesmen early, although that does not necessarily mean that they have to go on at immense length. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesman.

4.57 pm

**Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD):** Thank you very much, Sir John. It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair. I promise that I will not go on at great length, partly because—

**Tim Farron:** Because I did!

**Helen Morgan:** Well, my hon. Friend did go on at great length. He has secured a really important debate for World Cancer Day; it is an honour to speak in it for the Liberal Democrats. He outlined the issues comprehensively; I am not sure that I could improve on what he said. I welcome the Government's announcement earlier today on the national cancer strategy and I highlight the excellent work of my hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones), who campaigned for it.

Cancer services in general have declined to an unacceptable level, as I think everyone would agree. I hope that the Government stick to their word on addressing that issue and ensuring that everybody can access the care they need, when they need it and—as my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) pointed out so eloquently—where they need it.

In the UK, over 100,000 cancer patients receive radiotherapy treatment each year from a specialist workforce of 6,400 professionals. Cancer is one of the most difficult diseases—it is difficult for individuals and it is difficult for their families—and yet the number of patients who have waited over four months to receive cancer treatment has more than doubled since 2020.

Like so many areas of NHS care, the time people have to wait and the quality of care that they receive depends hugely on where they happen to live. That has to change; I hope that the Government will make that one of their urgent missions. People's chances of surviving should not depend on their postcode.

[Helen Morgan]

NHS data shows that the west midlands had over 150,000 radiotherapy attendances in 2022, which is the most recent available data. That is the highest of all regions, yet hospitals such as Shrewsbury and Telford hospital in my constituency have had some of the worst waiting times. In September 2024, at the Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin trust, only just over half of patients requiring radiotherapy met the 62-day treatment standard. The target for treatment is 85%.

It is important to acknowledge that the situation at Shrewsbury and Telford hospital trust is improving—I welcome that—and that it was impacted by the staff shortages that many hon. Members have outlined today. But it is not just about numbers and statistics; it is about the impact on people's lives. I think my hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham has pointed out the importance of scans, and some of my constituents who are undergoing cancer treatment have waited a long time for scans and say that sometimes they have not had the result of a scan until their next treatment was due. That is due to staffing shortages.

Waiting times are important, but so too are distances, particularly when somebody is poorly and finding it difficult to travel a long way. People in Shropshire are served in Shrewsbury, so I am glad to say that the distance issue is perhaps not as acute as it might be in other rural areas in the country, but the public transport issue remains so. Many people rely on friends and family to drive them to appointments, as there is no other reliable way of getting there and a taxi is simply too expensive for them to consider. For that reason, some will not be accessing the care that they need. Across the country, 3.4 million people live further away than the target of 45 minutes from a radiotherapy centre, so it is important that we address those radiotherapy deserts and ensure that people can access the care that they need.

In addition to the outdated, sparse machines and low morale, we found that 65% of staff felt that they did not have enough machine capacity and 93% felt that workforce numbers were too low. Therefore, in addition to the long distances involved, we must put an end to the problem of people being unable to be treated not just because they live a long way from the equipment, but because the equipment, when it is available, is outdated or because there is nobody to staff it properly and interpret what needs to be done.

My hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale has said all this before, so I will draw my remarks to a conclusion. The Liberal Democrats would boost cancer survival rates by introducing a guarantee that 100% of patients would start treatment within 62 days of their urgent referral. We need to replace the ageing radiotherapy machines and increase the number of machines, so that no one has to travel too far for treatment. We need to recruit nurses, cancer nurses and the specialist staff required to staff the radiotherapy machines. We would also like to see a cancer survival Bill, requiring the Government to co-ordinate and ensure funding for research into those cancers with the lowest survival rates. I hope the Minister will be making cancer a top priority for the new Government and push to reinstate the UK as a global leader in cancer research and, most importantly, in cancer outcomes.

I welcome the commitment already made to invest £70 million in replacing ancient machines and delivering new ones, but I hope the Minister will consider where that investment is distributed so that we can address the urgent problem of treatment deserts. I hope that he will also consider that this is a spend-to-save issue—radiotherapy treatment is both effective and cost-effective, and a worthwhile investment for the NHS to consider from a financial perspective.

I also want the Minister to commit to introducing a 10-year workforce plan for radiotherapy as part of the national cancer strategy to which the Government are already committed, to ensure that people get the care they need, when they need it, with the appropriately qualified professionals necessary to deliver it.

Finally, we must address the problem of building space. Many of our hospitals, as we all know, are crumbling. Care must be delivered in an appropriate setting, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham has outlined on a number of occasions. In conclusion, we welcome the Government's steps so far, but I would like to push them to go further.

**Sir John Hayes (in the Chair):** Thank you, Helen; as you predicted, your speech was pointed and not too long. I now call the shadow Minister.

5.3 pm

**Dr Caroline Johnson** (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Sir John.

As we discuss the future of radiotherapy services, it is essential that we acknowledge the vital role our radiographers, medical physicists and oncologists play, along with all the nursing staff and others, in the delivery of care.

The professionals are the backbone of any successful radiotherapy service, and without them progress is impossible. However, it is clear that Governments have faced significant challenges in both staffing and infrastructure. I will take this opportunity to scrutinise the current state of radiotherapy services and the plans to address those concerns. The demand for radiotherapy has increased substantially in recent years, driven primarily by one factor: our ageing population, and the fact that as we grow older our chances of being diagnosed with cancer increase significantly. However, radiotherapy is and remains one of the most cost-effective treatments available within the NHS. Previous Governments recognised that fact, and between 2016 and 2021 they invested £162 million to enable the replacement or upgrade of approximately 100 radiotherapy machines.

Since April 2022, the responsibility for investing in new machines has sat with local integrated care boards in England, supported by the 2021 spending review, which set aside money for the purpose. As hon. Members have said, to keep up with increasing demand and the need for cutting-edge care, there must be significant sustained investment in radiotherapy services. Radiotherapy is one of the most technologically advanced areas of healthcare, so it is incumbent on us to keep up with the latest scientific developments.

It is welcome that the Government have announced £70 million for new radiotherapy machines, but Radiotherapy UK has said that that is not enough and



has suggested that the Government invest five times that amount to upgrade out-of-date machines. I would appreciate clarification on that point. The Government have consistently stated in written answers that funding for new radiotherapy machines will be allocated by ICBs using criteria set by NHS England, but how will they monitor the upgrading of the machines across ICB areas to ensure that that takes place and to prevent the postcode lottery that Members have described? Furthermore, NHS England has confirmed that it will give high-performing local systems greater freedom around capital spending. Will such freedoms include capital retention, which can be used to invest in new radiotherapy equipment?

One of the most pressing issues is the need for a comprehensive long-term strategic plan for radiotherapy from the Government. The absence of such a plan hinders the ability to think strategically about the future of cancer care and to make the necessary investment to meet growing demand. I am glad that today, World Cancer Day, the Government have committed to produce a new cancer plan. We are told that it will include details about how outcomes for cancer patients, including waiting times, will be improved. Will the Minister indicate whether it will provide specifics on the roll-out of radiotherapy machines in the short, medium and long term?

In response to a written question last month, the Minister clarified:

“NHS England does not hold any data on the effectiveness of radiotherapy machines relative to the number of doses that they deliver.”

Hon. Members have said that newer machines will be able to deliver more doses more quickly. I would be interested to know whether the Department has any plans to collect such data.

Of course, any strategic plan should focus not just on the machines, but on the people who operate them—the radiotherapy workforce. What steps are the Government taking to improve the recruitment and retention of the radiotherapy workforce?

In a written question, the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale asked the Government whether they had consulted or planned to consult with clinical experts, the radiotherapy industry, patients or charities about how best to allocate the funds announced in the Budget for the new radiotherapy machines. The Minister responded by saying:

“The Department has no plans to consult on this matter”,

and reiterated that the funding would be allocated using NHS England criteria. The Minister today announced the plan to produce a cancer strategy. Will that include radiotherapy? Will he commit to working with Radiotherapy UK and providers to improve access to radiotherapy treatment where it is currently lacking?

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) made a very compelling case about long journeys. He spoke about a service in his constituency, and there are others that are similarly affected. We know that earlier treatment affects survival rates. I asked the Minister a question in the main Chamber earlier about the 62-day target, and I did not hear him answer. Will he confirm that he intends to stick to the Health Secretary's previous commitment to reaching the 62-day target by the end of this Parliament?

In addition to Government investment, the private sector plays a role in ensuring the future success of radiotherapy services. The NHS has signed a significant partnership agreement with the independent sector to increase capacity for diagnostic and elective procedures, which will help to reduce waiting times, but it is not clear whether that agreement includes treatment equipment such as radiotherapy machines. Will the Minister confirm whether the Government will work with the independent sector to upgrade equipment such as radiotherapy machines? A partnership that includes capital investment in radiotherapy equipment could ease the burden on the NHS and speed up access to treatment for patients.

I know the Minister is hugely motivated to do all he can to improve cancer care, as we all are. This debate should have helped to give him a steer on how that can be achieved.

**Sir John Hayes (in the Chair):** I ask the Minister to leave a few moments for Mr Farron to say a final word of wind-up, and Mr Farron, in turn, to leave me a few moments to put the question.

5.9 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Andrew Gwynne):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I thank the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for bringing this important debate to Parliament on World Cancer Day, and other Members for their contributions on this really important topic. I am happy to meet the hon. Member and his colleagues from the all-party parliamentary group on radiotherapy to discuss these issues further. I suspect that my diary is going to get busier, but I am more than happy to meet the hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones) as well, to ensure that we get this aspect of the national cancer plan absolutely right.

To answer one of the questions put by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), the national cancer plan will include radiotherapy—it would be odd if it did not, given the importance of radiotherapy—and I will work with Radiotherapy UK and others with an interest in this area. That is partly why we have launched our call for evidence today: to get the views and opinions of as many people and organisations as possible, so that we get the plan right. It has to be fit not just for 2025, but for 2035 and the years in between, so there is a lot of work to be done.

We know that cancer patients are waiting too long for treatment. That is why we are taking immediate action to kick-start the recovery of the NHS with a commitment to cut waiting times that will benefit all, including those with cancer. In our 10-year plan for the NHS, we committed to return our national health service to constitutional standards, including on cancer.

By investing in our workforce, a point made by several hon. Members, and allocating £70 million for new radiotherapy machines, we will reduce cancer waiting times and give more patients access to state-of-the-art treatments. Fixing the NHS also requires reform. This year, we will publish our 10-year health plan to help build a health service fit for the future and, as I have already mentioned, we are today announcing the launch

[Andrew Gwynne]

of a call for evidence for a dedicated national cancer plan, another step towards unleashing our country's potential as a world leader in saving lives from this deadly disease. I encourage everyone to have their say by responding to the national cancer plan call for evidence.

I assure hon. Members that the priority of this Government is to ensure that radiotherapy is available quickly to those who need it. Radiotherapy is a crucial treatment for many cancer patients, as it can shrink tumours very effectively. Although the vast majority of the population are located within reasonable distance of where they would go for treatment, I am very aware that that is not always the case, particularly in rural communities.

I can give a family example. My dad, who sadly died two years ago from a very rare and aggressive form of rectal cancer, benefited from superb treatment at the Christie in Manchester, which is our local cancer hospital. He had chemotherapy, immunotherapy and radiotherapy. The radiotherapy shrank his tumours, and that almost certainly gave him an extra two years of quality life with his family, including his great-grandson. I will forever be grateful that he received that.

One day, though, we took him to the Christie and he got chatting to somebody who was also receiving radiotherapy. This is pertinent to the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan), who leads on these matters for the Liberal Democrats, because this person was from Shropshire. My dad is Salopian born—he was born in Shrewsbury and brought up in High Ercall, before being dragged to Manchester in the 1950s when my grandad got a job as the chief accountant at Manchester education committee—and they got talking. “You’re really from Shropshire and you’re coming to Manchester for radiotherapy?” It was the nearest place that had that treatment available at that time. It really hit me then how sporadic these things are, and how some people have to travel unacceptably long distances. We need to make sure that in our national cancer plan, we look at the deserts and the accessibility issues.

**Tim Farron:** I would not be doing my job at all well if I did not pursue the Minister on this point. Earlier, he very kindly talked about meeting the all-party group to talk about the national picture, and I want to press him on our local bid to tackle the problem he has just spoken about. Will he meet me and local oncologists to talk about how we can deliver a radiotherapy satellite centre in Kendal?

**Andrew Gwynne:** I was just coming to that—the hon. Gentleman has obviously started to read my notes from a distance. I am aware that he met representatives of the previous Government to discuss the possibility of a satellite unit in his local area. The situation is the same now as it was then: it is the responsibility of the integrated care board, but if the hon. Gentleman thinks it would be helpful for us to have a meeting and see if we can push that case, my door is open. I absolutely recognise that people in that part of Cumbria would prefer to have those services closer to where they live. If we can impress that on his local ICB, let us see if we can make progress.

The Government aim to ensure that each treatment centre is accessible to the highest possible number of patients, as well as easily reached by the staff who work there. That is another consideration—it is not just the patients who have to physically get to these units, but the staff. We recognise that for those in rural communities, machinery may not be available at their local hospital, meaning that the only option is travel to specialist centres to receive the best possible care. Radiotherapy service provision is agreed by local systems, and each patient's care needs and treatment location are decided on a case-by-case basis by their clinicians. We are giving local systems greater flexibility and control, as they are best placed to understand and meet the needs of their communities, but to drive the national cancer plan forward, we have to tackle this postcode lottery and the deserts head-on.

Accessibility is also about making sure that we have the right workforce available to deliver the treatment in the right places and at the right time. That is why the number of training places has increased, and it is why we are improving the quality of education for assistant practitioners, diagnostics and therapeutic radiographers. NHS England is also working to improve the retention of radiographers and radiologists through initiatives such as increasing investment in career development. By ensuring our workforce feels supported, we put ourselves in a better position to deliver the care that people need.

Turning to investment in machines, I agree with the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale that we should be ambitious in our plans to ensure that patients are treated as quickly as possible. Lord Darzi's report highlighted the scale of the challenge we face: under the previous Government, waiting times for treatment increased, and more than 30% of patients waited longer than 31 days for radical radiotherapy.

In response to Lord Darzi's findings, we have taken urgent action to get the NHS back on its feet. At the recent Budget, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor supported our commitment to end the backlogs by announcing £70 million of investment in new radiotherapy machines in 2025-26. Replacing older radiotherapy machines with newer, more efficient and more technically advanced ones will ensure that patients can be seen more quickly. By doing so, we will improve access and speed up cancer treatment. Making more advanced machines available means that patients will have fewer trips to receive their treatment.

Hon. Members may be aware that NHS England has now allocated funding to trusts across the country to purchase the new radiotherapy machines with the £70 million investment. NHS England invited trusts to express interest in receiving funding to purchase a new machine. Allocation criteria focused on the age of the machine being replaced, the proportion of older machines in use in the trust and the trust's performance on radiotherapy. We expect to fund at least 27 new machines, which should be available to treat patients by spring 2026.

Those steps will ensure that we can improve cancer waiting times as soon as possible, helping us to put an end to the last Government's neglect and underinvestment. I reassure the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale, and other hon. Members, that we will continue to make the case for additional funding, so that we can continue

to upgrade machines and push the advances of the latest technological developments, for the benefit of patients with cancer.

I turn to the national cancer plan. Beyond immediate actions, we know that bold reform is required to rise to the growing challenge that cancers of all types represent. Lord Darzi found that cancer survival in this country is worse than in comparable countries, and that improvement slowed greatly during the 2010s. To help us to develop more targeted actions, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has announced the development of a national cancer plan, which was the subject of the statement I gave in the House just a few hours ago. The overarching aim of the plan is to reduce the number of lives lost to cancer. It will detail how we will improve outcomes for cancer patients, ensuring that patients have access to the most effective treatments and technology, including radiotherapy.

Today, we launched our national cancer plan call for evidence. We welcome views from all hon. and right hon. Members, as well as from clinicians, patients and their families—it is critical that we get the views of people who have lived experience of accessing cancer care—charities, researchers, members of the public and, of course, the excellent all-party parliamentary groups that champion cancer treatment and outcomes in this House.

In closing, I thank the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale for bringing this crucial matter to the House. I thank hon. Members, whose contributions have, in the spirit of this year's World Cancer Day, put places and people at the centre of care. I am pleased to assure hon. Members that we are undertaking both immediate actions and bold reforms to improve access to radiotherapy. There is a lot more that we need to do, and we will do it in partnership. This work is part of our effort to rebuild the NHS and deliver world-class cancer services for everybody—something that will always be a top priority for this Government and that is personal for me—so let's get on and achieve it.

5.24 pm

**Tim Farron:** First of all, Sir John, thank you for your oversight of this debate and for keeping us in order. I also thank everybody who has contributed from the Front and Back Benches. Members from all sides of the House have contributed so knowledgeably and passionately on behalf of their communities, so I am really grateful to them all.

I especially thank the Minister for his response and for agreeing to my two requests. That is great—I appreciate it very much indeed. I also appreciated his statement in the main Chamber earlier, when he spoke very movingly about his own family experiences. We share an experience: my mum also passed away from ovarian cancer, at a similar age to his mum. We begin to see the impact that cancer has on the lives of just about every single family, so when we get to a position where we can do something about it, what a privilege that is and what an opportunity, which we absolutely must not miss.

Since I still have a few moments left, I encourage Members who are not already members of the all-party parliamentary group on radiotherapy to join up, please:

we will not overburden you. I have discovered over time that decisions are so often made in the interest of the people who are in the room, so we need to be in the room. Chemotherapy is a really vital part of cancer treatment and the pharmaceutical industry that goes with it has tons of resource to lobby us; that is good, and it is entitled to do that. Radiotherapy is a very different industry. This is the lobby—so we need to be in the room to make sure that we are equally heard and that radiotherapy is part of the armoury to tackle and defeat cancer.

Money is vital, but leadership is key. Having people who will be “on it” constantly within NHS England at the senior levels—who want this to happen, who are dissatisfied with how things are and who are hungry for change—is essential, but, without meaning any disrespect to anybody, I do not see that at the moment. I am, though, encouraged by what the Minister said about trying to instil it.

Radiotherapy is non-invasive. It is increasingly targeted and accurate. In the time that I have been involved in this area of campaigning, I have seen an exponential increase in how targeted it is and therefore how strong the doses, so to speak—the fractions—can be. I have seen the damage that can be done to a tumour without seriously damaging the healthy tissue around it. If the Minister is trying to convince his right hon. Friend the Chancellor to give us more money, he should argue that radiotherapy is so beneficial for the economy, because people will go back to work healthy, earn money and pay taxes.

I thank the Minister very much again for responding to points made in the debate. My final point is to make again the case for satellite radiotherapy units around the country, not just in my patch. His civil servants might want to look into this more deeply. Among the wonderful people I met today was a young clinician, James, who works in a radiotherapy unit in London. He used to work in Cheltenham, which then of course branched out to have a satellite unit at Hereford. He was able to demonstrate and vouch for the fact that that new satellite unit ended up with getting on for 25% more patients than it had originally planned for. That was for one obvious reason: people who would not have had radiotherapy at all were able to get it because it was closer to them. The important thing to remember is that satellite units are not just about convenience—in fact, they are not even about convenience; they are about saving people's lives and returning people to normal life if possible.

I again thank the Minister for the attention he has given this issue, and I thank everybody else here today for taking part in this debate—not least yourself, Sir John.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered the accessibility of radiotherapy.

5.28 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*





# Written Statements

*Tuesday 4 February 2025*

## ATTORNEY GENERAL

### Serious Fraud Office (Contingencies Fund Advance)

**The Solicitor General (Lucy Rigby):** I would like to inform the House that a cash advance from the Contingencies Fund has been sought for the Serious Fraud Office.

The advance is required to cover costs relating to the investigation and prosecution of very large and complex cases pending parliamentary approval of the 2024-25 supplementary estimate. Part of the SFO's supplementary estimate will seek an increase in both its resource departmental expenditure limit and net cash requirement to cover the cost of very large and complex fraud, bribery, and corruption cases.

The SFO supplementary estimate includes additional funding for high cost casework with a small amount allocated for office improvement works as agreed through phase 1 of the spending review 2025.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £15,000,000 has been sought in a supplementary estimate for the SFO. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £15,000,000 will be met by a repayable cash advance from the Contingencies Fund.

The advance will be repaid upon Royal Assent of the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill.

[HCWS414]

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

### National Cancer Plan Call for Evidence

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Andrew Gwynne):** With today being World Cancer Day, I want to be clear about this Government's commitment to transforming cancer care and ensuring that fewer people die from this devastating disease by launching our call for evidence for a new national cancer plan.

One in two people will develop cancer in their lifetime and we are currently diagnosing and treating near record numbers of patients, with over 350,000—357,378—people receiving their first treatment over the last 12 months. This is expected to increase significantly as the population ages, with Cancer Research UK forecasting half a million cancer cases each year by 2040. The Tobacco and Vapes Bill will put us on track to a smoke-free UK, helping to reduce around 80,000 preventable deaths and reduce the burden on the NHS and on the taxpayer. While around 40% of cancers are caused by avoidable factors such as smoking, we know that much of the rise in cancer cases will be caused by ageing and is unavoidable.

We know the issues that are key to improving cancer survival. We know we need patients to be seen faster and cancers to be diagnosed earlier to secure better patient outcomes. We know that reducing the time it takes to be diagnosed and treated can make a crucial difference to a patient's outcome. I want every patient to get excellent care and treatment, and to achieve that, we need an effective and sustainable health and social care sector.

The independent review of the NHS by Lord Darzi set out the scale of the challenges we face in fixing the NHS, and the need to improve cancer waiting time performance and cancer survival. At the same time, he pointed to the NHS's success in delivering targeted lung health checks. That is transforming the early diagnosis of lung cancer in disadvantaged communities—something that he described as a sign of hope.

In response to the Darzi report, we have launched an extensive programme of engagement to develop a 10-year health plan to reform the NHS. We need the 10-year health plan to set out how we can build a health system fit for the future. It will set out the framework of reforms we need to ensure better outcomes across the NHS and to meet significant challenges like cancer. Furthermore, our elective reform plan sets out how we will return to the 18-week constitutional standard and put patient experience front and centre.

However, we know that the increasing number of cancer cases and the complexity of cancer care mean that we need a specific approach to cancer that aligns with our wider vision of how we want to reform the NHS. As a result, I am delighted to inform the House that we will publish a national cancer plan later this year, following publication of the 10-year health plan. I am determined to reduce the number of lives lost to cancer, and to ensure that many more people go on to lead a full life after their cancer treatment. The national cancer plan is the first step to preventing, diagnosing, and treating cancer more effectively. To achieve this goal, the plan will look at the full range of factors and tools that will allow us to transform outcomes for cancer patients and improve their experiences of treatment and care.

We cannot do this alone, and that is why we are launching a call for evidence from patients, doctors, nurses, scientists, our key partners, and other members of the public on what should be included in the plan.

Following a period of planning and engagement with our partners across the cancer community, we will aim to publish the national cancer plan in the second half of 2025.

I am pleased to inform the House that we will also be relaunching the children and young people's cancer taskforce to identify ways to improve outcomes and patient experience for children and young people with cancer. Dame Caroline Dinenage and Professor Darren Hargrave have been appointed as its co-chairs, alongside Dr Sharna Shanmugavadivel as vice-chair. I will update the House on progress in due course.

[HCWS415]





## Written Corrections

*Tuesday 4 February 2025*

### Ministerial Corrections

#### JUSTICE

##### Arbitration Bill [Lords]

*The following extract is from the Second Reading of the Arbitration Bill [Lords] on 29 January 2025.*

**Sir Nicholas Dakin:** I am getting towards the end of going through the clauses. In fact, I have come to the last and final clause that I wish to comment upon, clause 15, as you had probably worked out, Madam Deputy Speaker, because that usually comes after clause 14. *[Laughter.]* There is no clause 16, so clause 15 is the final clause.

*[Official Report, 29 January 2025; Vol. 761, c. 335.]*

*Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, the hon. Member for Scunthorpe (Sir Nicholas Dakin):*

**Sir Nicholas Dakin:** I am getting towards the end of going through the clauses. In fact, I have come to the last and final clause that I wish to comment upon, clause 15, as you had probably worked out, Madam Deputy Speaker, because that usually comes after clause 14. *[Laughter.]* **Clause 15 is the final clause I will speak to today.**

## HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

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

*The following extracts are from the Public Bill Committee evidence session on the Non-Domestic Rating (Multipliers and Private Schools) Bill on 11 December 2024.*

**Jim McMahon:** The permanent relief will come in at 40% in 2026-27, but we have included a transition period.

*[Official Report, Non-Domestic Rating (Multiplier and Private Schools) Public Bill Committee, 11 December 2024; c. 77, Q125.]*

*Written correction submitted by the Minister for Local Government and English Devolution, the hon. Member for Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton (Jim McMahon):*

**Jim McMahon:** The permanent **reduction** will come in 2026-27, but we have included a transition period.

**Jim McMahon:** What the evidence says is that there has been provision to ensure that those schools that are mainly or wholly for pupils with special educational needs will not be affected by these measures at all.

*[Official Report, Non-Domestic Rating (Multipliers and Private Schools) Public Bill Committee, 11 December 2024; c. 78, Q126.]*

*Written correction submitted by the Minister for Local Government and English Devolution, the hon. Member for Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton (Jim McMahon):*

**Jim McMahon:** What the evidence says is that there has been provision to ensure that those schools that are mainly or wholly for pupils with **an education, health and care plan** will not be affected by these measures at all.



# ORAL ANSWERS

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