

**Tuesday
11 February 2025**

**Volume 762
No. 91**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 11 February 2025

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Parkinson's: Patient Care in Newcastle-under-Lyme

1. **Adam Jogee** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): What steps he has taken to improve access to patient care for people with Parkinson's disease in Newcastle-under-Lyme constituency. [902677]

Mr Speaker: I welcome the Minister to her place.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): I thank my hon. Friend for his continued support for people with Parkinson's disease, a condition that I know is close to his family. This Government inherited long waits for neurology services, with only 53.4% of patients, including those with Parkinson's, waiting less than 18 weeks for a referral in June. Our elective reform plan will free up over 1 million appointments each year for those who really need them, including patients with Parkinson's, and NHS England's Getting It Right First Time programme continues to work with 27 specialised centres in England, including at University Hospitals of North Midlands.

Adam Jogee: I thank the Minister for her answer and congratulate her on her appointment. Will she join me in paying tribute to my constituent Julie Hibbs, from Bradwell in Newcastle-under-Lyme, who has long campaigned for support for people with Parkinson's, like her? Will the Minister meet me and Julie to discuss the merits of adding Parkinson's to the medical exemption list, and to discuss how we ensure that those with Parkinson's get the support they need and deserve?

Ashley Dalton: I am happy to meet my hon. Friend and his constituent to discuss all of those matters of concern—I look forward to doing so as soon as my diary will allow.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): The eyes are not only the windows to the soul, but a window to our health. Last week I had the pleasure of meeting the team at Moorfields eye hospital who, alongside a team at University College London, have done some work on a simple retinal scan that can detect Parkinson's disease seven years prior to any symptoms. Does the Minister agree that optometry, eye care and eye health should be at the forefront of NHS England's plan for integrated care, and that we should bring forward a national eye health strategy?

Ashley Dalton: Yes, I would be more than happy to support that. That is part and parcel of this Government's aim to shift the NHS from hospitals to community.

Mental Health Services

2. **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to improve access to mental health services. [902678]

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): After 14 years of Tory neglect and incompetence, we inherited a broken NHS, and nowhere is that more apparent than in our mental health services. Too many people are waiting too long to access the care they need. To fix that, we will recruit 8,500 more mental health workers; provide access to specialist mental health professionals in every school, as the hon. Member has called for; roll out Young Futures hubs in communities; and modernise the Mental Health Act 1983.

Munira Wilson: With the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill being amended to include a panel that will involve psychiatrists who will determine whether a request for assisted dying should be granted, as well as a number of cross-party amendments rightly calling for the involvement of mental health professionals earlier in the process, what assessment have Ministers made of whether there is sufficient capacity in mental health services, which the Minister has just noted are overstretched, to meet those demands, and on the potential knock-on impact on both waiting times and treatments for those with mental health conditions?

Stephen Kinnock: The hon. Lady will know that the Government's position on the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill is one of neutrality. I am on the Bill Committee simply to speak about the Government's position on the workability and operationalisation of the Bill. We look forward to seeing the amendment that will be brought forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater). Any comment we make or position we take will be based on the operationalisation of that amendment, should it become part of the Bill and, ultimately, should the Bill gain Royal Assent.

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): Thurrock community hospital does fantastic work on integrated care, particularly on integrated mental health care. On a visit, representatives said that what makes the hospital successful is a commitment to working across integrated care boards, the local authority and other relevant partners in the community, as well as a commitment to meeting people where they are, finding out what is important for them and working from there. Does the Minister see that model as integral to the reform of mental health care in this country? Will he join me on a visit to Thurrock community hospital to see what it does and what can be learned from how that work is undertaken?

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner on this issue in her constituency. She is right that the integration of services is crucial to ensuring that we get the best possible outcomes for people who are struggling with their mental health. I would be very happy to discuss with her the possibility of me visiting her constituency.

Jeremy Hunt (Godalming and Ash) (Con): Is the Minister aware of the brilliant work done by Mersey Care NHS foundation trust in reducing in-patient mental health suicides to zero, which is an extraordinary achievement. Under a former Health Secretary, who may be standing not a million miles away from where I am standing now, that became an objective for all mental health in-patient units across the NHS. Will the Minister look into whether that objective still stands? If not, can it be reinstated?

Stephen Kinnock: I am not familiar with the detail of the case that the right hon. Gentleman mentions, but it sounds like a positive and interesting development, and I would be happy to consider it further. The Government are committed to delivering the cross-sector suicide prevention strategy for England, published in 2023. The 8,500 new mental health workers who we will recruit will be specially trained to support people at risk.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): I am regularly contacted by constituents who are concerned that their children are not receiving the mental health care they need. Having met GPs in Winsford, I know that there are clear concerns that access to child and adolescent mental health services is being rationed to the point that it has become almost inaccessible to all but the most severe cases. Will my hon. Friend tell me what progress has been made towards our commitment to provide specialist mental health professionals in schools, ensuring that there is early intervention that prevents issues from escalating?

Stephen Kinnock: After the disastrous 14 years that we have had, we are facing a very serious situation in terms of mental health provision. It will take some time to get the workforce in place, but we have a clear commitment to having a specialist in every school. The appointment and training of those specialists will take some time. We are also rolling out open-access Young Futures hubs in every community. I am confident that the combination of those two interventions will get us back to having mental health services that this country can be truly proud of.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton), to her place. I look forward to working with her, as I do with other Ministers.

As the Minister for Care will know, 20% of the burden on the NHS is due to mental health, yet only 10% of the budget is allocated towards it. The mental health investment standard has been a welcome maintenance under this Government. However, the Select Committee heard from Amanda Pritchard the other day that the standard is guaranteed for only the next two years. Does the Minister agree that the standard has had a positive effect on mental health community services, and would he commit to protecting it?

Stephen Kinnock: The Chair of the Committee will have seen that we have made an explicit commitment to the mental health investment standard—we are absolutely

committed to that. In addition, we have to drive reform in the system so that it is about not just the amount of investment going in, but how we ensure that it is working properly. I am absolutely confident that the commitment to 8,500 new specialists, the Young Futures hubs and having a mental health specialist in every school will facilitate the delivery of services in a far more effective way than is currently the case.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his continued commitment to supporting mental health in this country. Does he also recognise that mental health involves supporting NHS frontline staff? I had the wonderful opportunity of spending time with the East of England ambulance service on Saturday morning. They work incredibly long hours and work incredibly hard. Obviously, we need to think about their mental health as well.

Stephen Kinnock: We in this Chamber should, whenever possible, pay tribute to the people providing those frontline services, who every day work heroically in very difficult circumstances. My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the pressures on the workforce—we are very conscious of that. We will bring forward a workforce plan in the summer, and we are working at pace to recruit the 8,500 mental health workers.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): Last week, the Secretary of State issued a new mandate for the NHS in which a number of mental health targets were dropped. I accept that targets that drive perverse behaviours should be dropped and that some sharpened focus is necessary, but mental health waiting lists are at a record high, huge numbers of people are not at work because of poor mental health, and our young people are being let down badly by CAMHS, not least in my constituency of North Shropshire. Does the Secretary of State accept that mental health targets should be reinstated and that mental health should be treated with equal priority to physical health?

Stephen Kinnock: What we know about targets is that if we try to overload a system with too many targets, it causes confusion and ends up with, as the hon. Lady rightly says, perverse outcomes. We are clear that we do not want to have a system based on just making policy by press release, as was the case under the previous Government, putting out press announcements about loads more targets. It all makes for nice front-page headlines, but it does not lead to any serious delivery of the strategy that we need to deliver. I am with her on the point about focus. We are absolutely committed to mental health, as is set out in the planning guidance. It is also one of the priorities in the planning guidance, and we will continue to deliver on that priority.

Global Health and Immunisation

3. **Monica Harding** (Esher and Walton) (LD): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs on the UK's leadership on global health and immunisation.

[902679]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): UK leadership on global health is critical to safeguarding our national and international health security, building resilience and creating prosperity. I work closely with my counterparts across Government. I recently met the Foreign Secretary to discuss these issues, which are also high on the agenda of the Minister for Development. The UK has one of the largest vaccination programmes in the world, and our confidence and uptake rates are among the highest globally.

Monica Harding: The NHS and the UK reap the benefits of our work in global health. Gavi is one of the UK's greatest success stories: it has inoculated 1 billion children worldwide, but it has also strengthened our health security, keeping us safe from diseases such as Mpox and Ebola. What leadership will the Secretary of State and his Department take to strengthen organisations such as Gavi to keep us safe here in the UK?

Wes Streeting: The hon. Member raises an important point. I know that my ministerial colleagues in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office are looking at the investment cases for Gavi and the Global Fund as part of the spending review. I will ensure that her representations are relayed to the FCDO, and she is very welcome to make those points during oral questions to that Department.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): There were almost 67,000 cases of serious antimicrobial-resistant infections in the United Kingdom in 2023. War is increasing such infections globally; 80% of patients in one Kyiv hospital in Ukraine are said to have such infections. The Conservative Government had a plan to tackle that. Do the Labour Government plan to follow that plan, are they on track to meet those targets, and if not, what will the Secretary of State do about it?

Wes Streeting: I am delighted that Dame Sally Davies continues her work on antimicrobial resistance. That is an absolutely critical issue, and I pay tribute to the previous Government, particularly Minister Quince, for their work on it. It is in the national interest that we maintain not just the national focus but the international focus on antimicrobial resistance, which is why UK leadership in those global fora is so important.

Dr Johnson: Another time when it is important to work together is during a pandemic, such as by sharing research. Unfortunately, recent history tells us that when Labour negotiates, Britain loses out. Can the Secretary of State confirm that, whatever emerges from discussions with the World Health Organisation, he will not reduce the UK's capacity to take decisions in the interests of the British people.

Wes Streeting: May I just say how regrettable it is that a sensible shadow Minister is sent along to parrot the absurd lines of her leader?

Hinchingbrooke Hospital

4. **Ben Obese-Jecty** (Huntingdon) (Con): If he will take steps to repair Hinchingbrooke hospital before buildings containing reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete reach the end of their lifespan in 2030. [902680]

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): As I am sure the hon. Member knows, Hinchingbrooke hospital is in wave 1 of the new hospital programme, and his constituents can now look forward to a new hospital under this Labour Government. The hospital has received over £44 million to deliver RAAC mitigation safety works, and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has commissioned a site-by-site survey of RAAC hospitals, which will ensure that individual development plans address the highest-risk elements as soon as possible.

Ben Obese-Jecty: Last July, Deborah Lee, the senior responsible officer for the Hinchingbrooke hospital redevelopment programme, stated that the deadline for the new hospital was 2030. In a written answer to me last year, the Minister confirmed that, even after the mitigation measures of failsafe steelwork, the lifespan of the remaining RAAC buildings would run only until approximately 2030. Can the Secretary of State confirm that the rebuild, and all waves of the new hospital programme, will not be delayed by the review of building safety regulations guidance announced by the Deputy Prime Minister in December? Will he assure my constituents that the RAAC buildings at Hinchingbrooke will be safe to use beyond 2030, and if so, will he publish the risk assessment that he has conducted to confirm that?

Karin Smyth: The hon. Gentleman has outlined the shocking state of some hospitals. I confirm again that we want a site-by-site report of those hospitals for exactly that purpose: to ensure that they are safe and to understand any critical issues before the schemes go forward. We expect that report in the summer.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): Given that the Tory predecessor of the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) failed to mention RAAC once, and mentioned Hinchingbrooke hospital only five times in 23 years, does the Minister agree that people in Huntingdon and across the country need a Labour Government committed to rebuilding the NHS, not a Tory Government who pay lip service but fail to back it up?

Karin Smyth: I commend my hon. Friend on his research into the previous Government, and for the hard work that he is doing on behalf of his constituents. We are committed to the rebuild of Hinchingbrooke and have put the new hospital programme on a sustainable footing, which is something that his constituents can look forward to.

Elective Care Waiting Times

5. **Ellie Chowns** (North Herefordshire) (Green): What progress his Department is making in reducing waiting times for elective care. [902681]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): This Government inherited a waiting list with a staggering 7.6 million people on it. Since July, that waiting list has already been reduced by almost 145,000, and ensuring that the NHS once again meets the 18-week standard for elective treatment is at the heart of the Government's plan for change. Our elective reform plan sets out how we will meet that standard by the end of this Parliament, through a combination of investment and reform that Labour knows from past experience delivers results.

Ellie Chowns: I get regular messages from constituents facing terrible waits for care with potentially serious consequences, including a one-year delay for an early dementia referral and an 18-month delay for a cardiology review. Although I understand the case for the short-term, one-off use of spare private capacity to tackle the backlog while the NHS is rebuilt, can the Secretary of State please outline his longer-term thinking regarding privatisation of the national health service? In particular, why is he encouraging the development of long-term relationships with the private sector?

Wes Streeting: The NHS has always worked constructively with the independent sector, and I do not believe that ideological hobby horses should come before patients getting faster access to care. This Government are investing in our NHS, and before the hon. Lady complains about that, I would just point out that the Green party's manifesto on the NHS said that it would require an

“additional annual expenditure of £8bn in the first full year”

of this Parliament, rising to £28 billion later. The Chancellor has just delivered a Budget that delivers £26 billion of additional investment, and the Greens complain about it.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): I welcome the new Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton), to her place. Hundreds of my constituents are on waiting lists for knee and hip operations, and while the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns) says that she would like to see those waiting lists reduced, the Green party has done everything it can to oppose Labour's plan for change—it opposed our Budget, with its record investment in the NHS, and it opposed our agreement with the independent sector to bring down the backlog. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is time for the Opposition parties to stop wishing for a reduction in waiting lists and start backing Labour's credible plan to make a real difference?

Wes Streeting: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. As we know from the Greens' experience in local government, they cannot clear the bins, let alone the waiting lists.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): The Labour Government's elective reform plan says that there are plans for 10 straight-to-test pathways. Can the Secretary of State name them, or give one example?

Wes Streeting: It is absolutely ridiculous, Mr Speaker. Conservative Members turn up, criticising and carping about this Government's elective reform plan, but I remind the hon. Gentleman that when his party was in office, it delivered the longest waiting lists in the history of the NHS. If he wants to do a pop quiz, he can use Google.

Dr Evans: This is the Secretary of State's own plan. There was one example in the plan, but as an article in *The BMJ* on 17 January helpfully pointed out, that one example—which featured Sarah, who had sinus pain and hearing issues—was quietly removed from all online and future drafts after

“a flurry of GPs pointed out that her treatment”

was “wholly inappropriate.” That article went on to say that

“Sarah can pick up her dose of unnecessary radiation along with her weekly shop.”

On this part of the Government's plan, *The BMJ* concluded:

“Sarah's story is one of over-investigation, fragmented and inappropriate care, spurious choice, and a lack of senior decision making at first presentation. Activity for activity's sake has little to do with high quality care.”

Does the Secretary of State agree with *The BMJ*, and if not, why not?

Wes Streeting: I always believe in holding our hands up when mistakes are made. I am happy to say that the reason that case study was removed from the published elective reform plan is because it was a genuine mistake, for which I accept responsibility as the Secretary of State. Now, maybe the Conservative party might like to accept responsibility for the highest waiting lists and lowest patient satisfaction in history, and finally have the decency to apologise to the country for the mess it left us in.

Hospices

6. **James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab):** What steps his Department is taking to support hospices. [902682]

7. **Kate Osamor (Edmonton and Winchmore Hill) (Lab/Co-op):** What steps his Department is taking to support hospices. [902683]

20. **Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab):** What assessment his Department has made of the adequacy of long-term funding for hospices. [902697]

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): Hospices provide vital care and support for patients and their families at the most difficult time. I am very proud that this Government have provided a £100 million capital funding boost for adult and children's hospices over this year and next. We are currently finalising the delivery mechanism for this funding, and we are pleased that Hospice UK is standing ready to distribute the money to local hospices across England. We are also providing £26 million of revenue funding for children's hospices in England in 2025-26.

James Naish: While I wholeheartedly welcome the £100 million capital funding boost for hospices announced before Christmas, 17 members of staff at Nottinghamshire hospice, which is a large community-based hospice serving my constituency that provides care for family members in their own homes, have recently been told they are at risk of redundancy. Can the Minister please expand on how the Government will support organisations such as this to continue to deliver excellent care in the community?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank my hon. Friend for this important question, and I commend the work of hospices such as Nottinghamshire hospice in his constituency, which I know does a wonderful job for people in his area. The investment I referred to in my earlier answer will help hospices such as Nottinghamshire hospice to provide quality end-of-life care to patients and their families this year and next. It can be used to improve IT systems, make it easier for GPs and hospitals to share

vital data on patients, and help to develop and improve outreach services to support people in their own homes, when needed.

Kate Osamor: North London Hospice in my constituency has a site in Winchmore Hill that receives one third of its funding from the NHS, with the rest coming from the generosity of the public. Many of its services, such as out-patients and wellbeing, are funded entirely by donations. While it welcomes the announcement of the £100 million in funding, what assurances can the Government provide about long-term hospice funding, given the significant delays in accessing funding from integrated care boards this year? Hospices are anxious to seek clarity about the allocation and distribution of this funding.

Stephen Kinnock: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. On her point about long-term funding, last week I chaired a roundtable with key stakeholders from the sector, and we were absolutely focused on developing a plan to secure the long-term sustainability of the sector. We cannot go back to the cliff edge that we have had over the last few months, primarily due to the utterly chaotic and shambolic way in which the Conservative party managed our system in the past.

Harpreet Uppal: I have had the privilege of witnessing at first hand the exceptional work of my local hospices, Forget Me Not children's hospice and the Kirkwood. However, as my hon. Friends the Members for Rushcliffe (James Naish) and for Edmonton and Winchmore Hill (Kate Osamor) have stated, they are also struggling with long-term funding pressures and have had to make the difficult decision to reduce services and staff. What further work are the Government doing to ensure that hospices thrive, and to ensure that end-of-life care is included in the 10-year NHS plan?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. One of the three shifts that the 10-year plan will deliver is shifting more healthcare out of hospitals and into the community. In the context of the plan, we are having discussions about the long-term sustainability of the palliative and end-of-life care sector, including hospices. As we develop the plan, we will be carefully considering policies in this area, with input from the public, patients, health staff and our stakeholders. As I mentioned in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton and Winchmore Hill (Kate Osamor), last week I was pleased to chair a roundtable to discuss long-term strategies for hospices to get palliative and end-of-life care, including hospices, on to a more sustainable footing after 14 years of Tory neglect and incompetence.

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): Leicestershire is home to some superb hospices, such as Rainbows and LOROS, both of which are set to be massively impacted by the hike in national insurance contributions. Given the important work that these hospices do, particularly for people at the end of their lives, will the Minister urge the Chancellor to reverse this pernicious tax rise?

Stephen Kinnock: I am once again struck by the fact that Conservative Members seem to welcome the additional investment that the Chancellor has put into our health

and care service, but do not seem to have any plan or proposals at all about how the revenue should be generated for that funding. Until we get an answer to that question, we will struggle to get much further in this House, although I note that Toby Porter, the chief executive of Hospice UK, has said that the

“funding will allow hospices to continue to reach hundreds of thousands of people every year with high-quality, compassionate care. We look forward to working with the government to make sure everyone approaching the end of life gets the care and support they need”.

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): First, may I pay tribute to those who work in hospices? I think we can all agree that they do an astonishing job. The Minister will agree that the national insurance hike has had an impact on those who work in hospices. Can he assure me that when it comes to the Scottish Government's funding—I acknowledge the 14 years of Tory misrule and the funding settlements that were handed down—any Barnett consequential will be passed on in full to the devolved Administrations?

Stephen Kinnock: We have seen the biggest settlement in many years for our health and care system across the country. It is now up to the SNP Government in Edinburgh to absorb and deliver that funding in a way that will actually improve services in Scotland—something that we have not seen for a very long time under the misrule of the Scottish National party.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The magnificent work done by those who work in hospices, including the four in Northern Ireland, needs to be reflected in the funding formula. Will the Minister undertake to discuss with ministerial colleagues the need for the Treasury to review that funding formula, particularly in relation to devolved settlements?

Stephen Kinnock: From the roundtable discussions, and from subsequent discussions we have been having with the sector, it is clear that we need to look at the long-term funding issue. We faced a cliff edge towards the end of last year. That is not the right way to do things. We must start getting the funding discussions moving so that, well in advance of the end of this financial year, the funding situation for the palliative and hospice sector is much clearer.

Reducing Healthcare Inequalities

8. **Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): What steps he is taking to reduce inequalities in healthcare. [902684]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): Lord Darzi's report laid bare the shocking health inequalities in our country. It is completely unacceptable that in Britain in 2025, maternal mortality rates for black women are more than double those of white women and life expectancy at birth for females in Blackpool is eight years less than in Kensington and Chelsea. Reducing inequalities in elective care was identified as a key priority in the planning guidance and mandate that the NHS published last month, and further measures to address these inequalities in our country will be at the heart of our 10-year health plan, which will be published in the spring.

Debbie Abrahams: In 2013, the then coalition Government reduced the health inequalities weighting in the NHS formula, with the result that less money went to deprived areas. That was despite evidence that between 2001 and 2011, every £10 million invested in such areas resulted in four fewer men and two fewer women dying early. Can my hon. Friend reassure Government Members that that health inequalities weighting will be reinstated so that we can ensure that deprived areas get the funding they need and that lives are saved?

Ashley Dalton: The Government mandate to NHS England was published on 30 January and makes the importance of tackling health inequalities clear. NHS England has an existing programme that targets the most deprived 20% of the population, with the aim of reducing health inequalities. I can reassure my hon. Friend, who has been a determined campaigner on inequalities, that the health inequalities weighting has not been withdrawn. The funding in question, which amounted to £200 million, has been incorporated into the main integrated care board allocation. The weighting of that health inequalities adjustment has been increased from 10% to 10.2%, so that the ICBs still benefit from that extra investment, with funding redistributed to areas with the poorest health outcomes, based on measures of avoidable mortality provided by the Office for National Statistics.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): I welcome the hon. Lady to her position. She may be unaware of the number of debates that I have led into women's health and endometriosis and pelvic mesh, and there is an inequality in the health service with how women are treated. Many women are deeply concerned by the announcements and statements about how the concentration on women's health has been reduced. Will the Minister speak to the president of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists? Following that meeting, will she speak to the Secretary of State, who rightly says that he recognises when mistakes have been made, about reconsidering the approach to women's health taken in the statement the other week?

Ashley Dalton: The Darzi review highlighted that there were too many targets set for the NHS, which made it hard for local systems to prioritise actions. There has been no reduction in women's health services. The Government are committed to prioritising women's health as we build an NHS that is fit for the future, and women's equality will be at the heart of our missions. Women's health hubs, which provide integrated women's health services in the community, have a key role in tackling the inequalities faced by women. The Department has invested £25 million over 2023-24 and 2024-25 to support the establishment of at least one pilot women's health hub in every integrated care system.

Antenatal Care: Vasa Praevia Screening

9. **Connor Naismith** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Whether he has had discussions with NHS England on including vasa praevia screening as part of antenatal care. [902685]

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): I thank my hon. Friend for his ongoing work in raising awareness in maternity services. We are committed to improving

maternity care for women and babies. Evidence does not currently support screening for vasa praevia in the UK, but we have asked the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists to review the guidance around this issue.

Connor Naismith: My constituent Cate Maddison suffered with severe vasa praevia in childbirth. This condition causes severe bleeding and can often result in the death of infants in childbirth and complications for the mother. However, the risks are significantly reduced when identified during pregnancy. Thankfully, Cate's child survived, but she is campaigning to reduce unnecessary complications and deaths arising from the condition. Will the Minister meet me and Cate to discuss how we can tackle this important issue?

Karin Smyth: I am incredibly sorry to hear about Cate's experience. We want to ensure that women receive safe, personalised and compassionate maternity care and that women with the condition are supported. That is why we have asked the college to look at the guidance. I will of course be happy to meet my hon. Friend and his constituent.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): There is clearly a need to consider vasa praevia as part of antenatal care. The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Connor Naismith) set the scene very well and the Minister responded in a good fashion. This issue, which the hon. Member was right to highlight, is also an issue in Northern Ireland. Will the Minister share what is going forward here with representatives at the Northern Ireland Assembly?

Karin Smyth: I thank the hon. Member for that point. As he knows, I am always keen to ensure we share good practice across the United Kingdom so that his constituents, like mine, can benefit. We will work through the usual processes to ensure that happens.

Stepping Hill Hospital

10. **Lisa Smart** (Hazel Grove) (LD): If he will provide funding for the repair of Stepping Hill hospital in Stockport. [902686]

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): I thank the hon. Lady, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra), for her continued support for Stepping Hill hospital. I know that she is working hard on this issue. We are backing the NHS with over £4 billion of funding for integrated care boards for capital priorities, with a dedicated £750 million estate safety fund next year to address the poorest quality hospitals. I am pleased that the replacement of Stepping Hill's outpatient facility is already under way, backed by £11.5 million this year. I look forward to visiting as soon as my diary allows.

Lisa Smart: I am grateful to the Minister for her response and our ongoing correspondence on this issue. I very much look forward to meeting her on site at Stepping Hill so that she can see for herself the reported £134 million repairs backlog at the site. The most recent board papers mentioned a £19.9 million significant risk backlog, which is having a detrimental effect on the hospital team's ability to see and treat patients. What

hope can the Minister give that there is a plan for the funding of buildings at Stepping Hill so that my constituents get the treatment that they deserve?

Karin Smyth: The hon. Lady outlines for her constituents what many across the House will recognise: the state that the last Government left the capital estate in. The autumn Budget committed over £13 billion into next year, with £4 billion for ICBs to start prioritising some of this work. We have allocated £1 billion for critical backlogs, maintenance and upgrades. A longer-term capital plan will follow the 10-year plan that we are currently developing to offer the hope for her constituents that she asks for.

Special Educational Needs Assessments

11. **Charlotte Cane** (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): What steps his Department is taking with Cabinet colleagues to increase access to assessments for special educational needs. [902687]

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): Children and young people with special educational needs are waiting too long for the NHS services that they need, in large part because local authorities have been hollowed out by 14 years of austerity. We are supporting earlier intervention through the partnerships for inclusion of neurodiversity in schools—PINS—programme, which is backed by £13 million of funding. NHS England has also launched a taskforce to look at how support can be improved for people with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. We look forward to its report later this year.

Charlotte Cane: Cambridgeshire has some of the lowest funding in England for GP practices and schools. Given the Government's focus on growth for the area and the record demand for special educational needs and disabilities and young people's mental health services, will the Minister work with colleagues across Government to ensure that high-growth areas no longer suffer lower than average funding?

Stephen Kinnock: Our commitment to improving SEND conditions is universal. We are looking at this from the point of view of improving provision right across the country. I am very pleased that the PINS programme is making progress. I draw the hon. Lady's attention to the early language support for every child—ELSEC—programme, in which nine pathfinder sites over two years will provide early identification, and targeted and universal support for children with speech, language and communication needs in early years and primary school settings. We are working very closely with colleagues across the Department for Education and NHS England on that.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): Local authority resources are a big driver of some challenges in the SEND system, but it is clear to anyone working in it that a systemic under-prioritisation of children's health, all too often by local NHS trusts, is a big contributing factor. Young people right across my constituency waiting for assessment and lacking support are paying the price. As part of our 10-year plan to reform the NHS, how will we ensure that children's health is front and centre again, with much more support for people with additional needs?

Stephen Kinnock: I am working very closely with colleagues in the DFE on how we mainstream SEND provision more effectively, get more rapid education, health and care plans and autism diagnoses, and on a whole range of issues that require strong cross-party work. I would be happy to brief my hon. Friend on that separately.

Dementia Diagnosis Rates

12. **Joe Robertson** (Isle of Wight East) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help reach the national dementia diagnosis rate target. [902688]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): The dementia diagnosis rate target was not met for the last five years of the Conservative Government, and it declined over the course of the last Parliament. This Government are committed to ensuring that at least two thirds of people living with dementia receive a diagnosis. The Government are investing in dementia research across all areas, from causes, diagnosis and prevention to treatment, care and support, to help people live with this condition.

Joe Robertson: Nearly 1 million people are living with dementia—it is the biggest cause of death in the country today—and by the end of the 2030s that figure is set to rise to 1.4 million. Early diagnosis is one of the best things we can do to support people living with dementia, so will the Secretary of State explain why the dementia diagnosis target no longer features in NHS England's priorities, as published two weeks ago? Will he commit to reinstating both dementia and the commitment to a diagnosis target in NHS England's priority guidelines?

Wes Streeting: I just restated the Government's commitment to ensuring that at least two thirds of people living with dementia receive a diagnosis. Our investment and reform agenda will speed up diagnostics across the board. Under the last Government, NHS planning guidance was a wish list of fantasy targets, most of which were never met. As the NHS got worse and worse, they piled on more targets to make themselves look busy. This Government are ending the micromanagement, turning our NHS around and clearing up their mess.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): My dad was a GP in Hartlepool for over 30 years—the Secretary of State was kind enough to meet him the last time he was in Hartlepool—and he has Alzheimer's. Every day, I think about why we did not spot the signs early enough to get the treatment that he needed at an earlier stage. The Alzheimer's Society estimates that only 29% of social care workers have any form of dementia training. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is critical that we up that number and ensure that all social care workers have dementia training, to ensure early diagnosis?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question—I know how personal this issue is for him. I was delighted to meet his father on my visit to Hartlepool, and wish him very well. I take very seriously what my hon. Friend has said about the importance of workforce training. He mentioned training for health and social care staff, which is important, but I would argue that the point applies more broadly across our society. On 6 September, the Department launched the adult social

care learning and development support scheme, which allows eligible employers to claim for funding for certain training courses and qualifications, including relevant dementia training, for eligible care staff. We will continue to keep this under observation and review.

Nursing: Career Progression Inequalities

13. **Sojan Joseph** (Ashford) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help tackle career progression inequalities in nursing. [902690]

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): I know that this issue is close to my hon. Friend's heart, after his years of service as a nurse in the health service. We have to ensure that the NHS is an attractive place for nurses to work, and that they can progress. We hear directly from staff through our 10-year plan, and work closely with the Royal College of Nursing, Unison and other trade unions through our social partnership forum.

Sojan Joseph: I must disclose that I worked as a mental health nurse in the NHS for the past 22 years, and that in my career, I progressed from nurse to head of nursing.

Recruitment and retention of nursing staff across the health and social care sector is key to delivering an NHS that is fit for the future, but the most recent NHS staff workforce survey showed that just 56% of staff felt that the health service acted fairly when it came to career progression. What steps will this Government take to address this issue, and to ensure that our nursing workforce feel valued and feel a sense of purpose in their wider work?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the issue is key, and that the results are worrying. I know how proud my friends and family members were to become nurses, and what a great career nursing offered them. We have to deliver on the promise of a good career, and build on that pride in being a nurse. We absolutely recognise that we cannot rebuild the NHS without their skills and their high-quality critical and compassionate care.

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Ind): Does the Minister believe that the NHS should expect biologically female nursing staff to get changed in front of biologically male colleagues who identify as female?

Karin Smyth: No.

Waiting Lists: Devolved Administrations

14. **Robin Swann** (South Antrim) (UUP): What steps he is taking to help devolved Administrations reduce waiting lists. [902691]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): I was delighted to work closely with the hon. Gentleman when he was Minister for Health for Northern Ireland, and I am delighted to work with his successor. I have met regularly with my counterparts in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales since I took up office. The Chancellor's recent Budget meant a massive £26 billion-a-year boost for the health and social care services; thanks to the Barnett consequential, the devolved Administrations will benefit from a major increase in their budgets—the biggest since devolution began.

Robin Swann: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. Just over a year ago, the former Health Secretary wrote to counterparts in the devolved Administrations to offer patients from Wales and Scotland who were experiencing lengthy waits the option of treatment by providers in England. The offer was declined, as it was seen as a political stunt. Would the Secretary of State consider reviewing that offer, but this time including Northern Ireland, so that his call to offer the best of the NHS to the rest of the NHS can be shared across the entire nation?

Wes Streeting: I am absolutely committed to our working across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland on cross-border working and co-operation, where we can. I have had constructive conversations, particularly with my counterpart in Wales, to that effect, and I would be delighted to work with my counterpart in Northern Ireland in the same spirit. Despite our differing views on the future of the United Kingdom, I have had equally constructive discussions with my counterpart in Scotland, although he may not thank me for mentioning it.

Topical Questions

T1. [902702] **Brian Leishman** (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): Yesterday, we kicked off National HIV Testing Week. Getting tested for HIV is quick, free and confidential. I pay tribute to the leadership of my right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister, who became the first leader in the history of the G7 to take an HIV test. As a former member of the independent HIV Commission, I am determined that this Government will deliver on our commitment to end new transmissions of HIV in England by 2030. We will set out our aim shortly in our new action plan, which will be developed by me and my brilliant new Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton).

Brian Leishman: Fourteen years of austerity have created a new stratum of society: the in-work poor. Recent talk of ruthless cuts to social security is beyond alarming. Does the Secretary of State agree that having a welfare system that covers the cost of essentials, as proposed by the Trussell Trust and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, would alleviate hunger and hardship, and therefore relieve considerable strain on the NHS?

Wes Streeting: I am a product of the welfare state, and I remember the benefit system putting food in the fridge and money in the electric meter. I also know from lived experience that people who are trapped in the benefits system want to escape. The best way out of poverty is not through social security, important though that is, but through fair, decent work that pays. That is the Government's agenda.

Mr Speaker: Just a reminder that we are on topicals, folks.

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton) on her promotion to the Front Bench.

Eating disorders affect over 1.25 million people, and this is the last Health and Social Care Question Time before Eating Disorders Awareness Week, which starts later this month. The Secretary of State will be aware of the amazing work done by the eating disorder charity Beat, which I met a few months ago, and to which I pay tribute. Will he back Beat's call for broader access to intensive community and day treatment for those with eating disorders—there are limited places currently—and set out a timetable in which that will be delivered?

Wes Streeting: I really welcome the shadow Secretary of State's raising that important issue. Too often, even when patients with eating disorders are in health settings, they do not receive the right care or support at the right time. I would be delighted to receive representations from Beat on how we can improve the situation.

Edward Argar: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that answer. He will know that osteoporosis impacts 3 million people. He is aware of the campaign by the Royal Osteoporosis Society, and the powerful parallel campaign led by *The Mail on Sunday* and the *Daily Mail*, for access to fracture liaison services across the country. Pre-election, he committed to support that, and a roll-out plan. People will look for an answer that looks to the future, not the past, so when will he publish the fracture liaison services roll-out plan, to ensure that all who need to access those vital services can, and will he work with campaigners and me to achieve that roll-out before 2030?

Wes Streeting: This is unusually consensual today. The Government are committed to rolling out fracture liaison services across every part of the country by 2030. I promised that before the election, and that is what we are delivering. In fact, we have already started by investing in 14 hi-tech DXA—dual-energy x-ray absorptiometry—scanners, which are expected to provide an extra 29,000 scans to ensure that people with bone conditions get diagnosed earlier. I note that the shadow Secretary of State does not want to look to the past—I am not surprised, given the Conservatives' record—but I am sure that we can work together in the future.

T2. [902703] **Joe Morris** (Hexham) (Lab): For those in villages such as Slaggyford, Kirkhaugh and Mohope, the cottage hospital in Alston is closer than the hospital in Hexham. As my constituent Rowland outlined to me, despite that proximity, ambulance services find themselves restricted by county borders. Rural constituents' access to healthcare and rapid response services are suffering as a result. Will the Minister meet me to discuss ambulance services in rural areas?

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): I holidayed in my hon. Friend's constituency this summer—it is a very beautiful part of the world—so I understand some of the rural challenges. It is a matter for local integrated care boards how they organise ambulance services. There are many problems that we want to resolve, and I would of course be very happy to meet him.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I, too, welcome the new Minister to her place. This morning's oral health survey revealed that more than one in five five-year-olds in England have experienced dental decay, affecting their ability to smile and socialise, as well as causing pain and distress. Will the Secretary of State guarantee the Government's commitment to tackling the problem, and back Liberal Democrat calls for an emergency scheme that guarantees dental check-ups for children?

Wes Streeting: This is an issue that the Government are prioritising. The hon. Member will be aware of the commitment we made to provide 700,000 urgent dentistry appointments. We are ramping up to deliver on that commitment, as well as to deliver supervised toothbrushing in our schools. Further wider-ranging reform is needed; I am working closely with the Minister for Care to rebuild NHS dentistry, after the rot left in it by the Conservatives.

T8. [902709] **Matthew Patrick** (Wirral West) (Lab): As we heard from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, this is National HIV Testing Week. In the Liverpool city region, Steve Rotherham is forming plans to end new HIV cases by 2030, and the Royal Liverpool university hospital is starting opt-out testing. As my right hon. Friend said, this week, our Prime Minister became the first leader in, I think, the G20 to take an HIV test. What plans does my right hon. Friend have to ensure that there is more HIV testing beyond this important week?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): Increasing HIV testing is a vital step towards meeting our goal, and it will be a core element of our new HIV action plan, which will be published later in the year. We are investing more than £4.5 million in delivering a national prevention programme, and, with backing of an extra £1.5 million, we will extend the programme for a further year, until March 2026.

T3. [902704] **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): The charity that organised the campaign "The Darker Side of Pink" estimates that 31 women lose their battle against metastatic breast cancer every day, which means that more than 20,000 have died since I first raised this matter two years ago during Prime Minister's Question Time. What will the Government do to increase awareness, understanding, the availability of drugs and screening for women facing this challenge?

Wes Streeting: The hon. Member is right to raise this serious and important issue. We want to ensure that we improve diagnostics, access to treatment and research, and I can think of no better person to lead the work on this area of the national cancer strategy than my hon. Friend the Minister for Secondary Care, who has lived experience, and who demonstrates that people can live well with cancer.

T9. [902710] **Lee Pitcher** (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): Women across the country, including my constituent Lisa from Haxey, are struggling to access vital hormone replacement therapy medications, such as Estradot patches. Owing to a 30-year-long medical condition, Lisa had her ovaries removed and now faces severe health consequences because of these ongoing medication shortages, and there is no resolution expected soon. Given the

repeated supply issues with HRT in recent years, what actions is the Minister taking to ensure a consistent and reliable supply of those essential medicines?

Karin Smyth: I entirely appreciate the frustration and distress caused by medical supply shortages. We are working intensively with industry to resolve the HRT supply issues, and the problems with the supply of Estradot are expected to be resolved by the end of the month. Meanwhile, we have issued a serious shortage protocol to allow community pharmacists to supply alternative brands of the same medicine, and those remain available.

T4. [902705] **Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): My constituent James, from Abbots Langley, wrote to me on the subject of the Chancellor's recent talk about pushing infrastructure projects, such as the Heathrow airport expansion. Why is the Health Secretary not pushing for this infrastructure funding to be spent on the new Watford General hospital, a project that has cross-party support, is shovel-ready and will save lives?

Wes Streeting: If the hon. Member is so committed to that project, perhaps he can explain why his party did so little about it in government.

Peter Lamb (Crawley) (Lab): Since April, Crawley's urgent treatment centre has been temporarily closed overnight because of low staffing levels. What do the Government intend to do to ensure that normal services are resumed for communities such as mine?

Karin Smyth: We are absolutely committed to urgent treatment centres, which play a vital role in supporting patients, especially during periods of high demand. I understand that this is temporary, and that the centre is running a pilot. I know that my hon. Friend will work closely with his local integrated care board to ensure that it serves his constituency adequately.

T5. [902706] **Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): There are 153,000 people in the United Kingdom living with Parkinson's, and one in 137 will be diagnosed during their lifetimes. There are 18,000 new cases every year, 4,200 of them in Northern Ireland. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is time we had a Parkinson's charity, not just for England but for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as well? As I always say, let us do it better together.

Wes Streeting: Where have I heard that before? The hon. Member knows that I will agree with him on the matter of the Union, but I also believe that we should work cross-border wherever we can, especially when it comes to important issues such as Parkinson's. We have to make better breakthroughs in research, treatment and, hopefully, finding a cure.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): After 14 years of Conservative government, 77% of people in Derby cannot access an NHS dentist. Can the Minister tell us what caused the rot to set in and how we can fill the cavities in provision?

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): I see what my hon. Friend did there, and she should brace herself as we drill down into this answer. The Conservative

party is the cause of the rot: spending on NHS dentistry fell by a staggering 18% between 2010 and 2024, so it is little wonder that dentistry is on its knees. We will shortly set out plans to introduce supervised tooth brushing for three to five-year-olds in the most deprived communities, and we are working with the dental sector to implement our rescue plan.

T6. [902707] **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): New research from Marie Curie has found that 85% of public expenditure on people in the final year of life in Scotland is spent in hospitals and only 14% on community care. The figures are very similar for England. What work is being done to ensure a minimum standard of community treatment for people in the final year of life?

Stephen Kinnock: It is vital that we have a palliative and end of life care service that works and is on a sustainable footing. I have had discussions with the sector. We want to ensure that we do not have the cliff edge that we had at the end of last year. The hon. Gentleman is right to point to this, and we will report back in due course.

Sally Jameson (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister will be aware that the contract uplift for dentists is facing a near 11-month delay. Can he confirm that dentists will be receiving their uplift? What will be done to make sure that they receive enough money to cover the costs of NHS dentistry?

Stephen Kinnock: I can reassure my hon. Friend on that point. We implemented the contract uplift on 29 January. Dentists will therefore be receiving their uplifted payments in March, backdated to 1 April 2024. For the first time in more than a decade, we have also increased payments for practices training a foundation dentist.

T7. [902708] **Sir John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): In Maldon, the number of patients per GP is already 50% above the number for England, and that will only increase with the amount of proposed house building. GPs are struggling to cope with ever increasing costs, and I have one practice still undertaking so-called collective action. Will the Government review the whole system of GP funding before it breaks down completely?

Stephen Kinnock: We are in negotiations about the future contract with the General Practitioners Committee England of the British Medical Association. Those negotiations are proceeding, and the right hon. Gentleman is right that we need serious reform; we will be pushing reforms through on that basis. On his point about the estate, we have a £102 million commitment on capital for the primary care estate, which I think will go some way towards reassuring him.

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for all the support he has given the University of East Anglia to set up its dental school, but he will be aware that all those shiny new dentists coming out in a few years' time will be going into the private sector, not the NHS, unless we can sort out the NHS dental contract. Can he give us any kind of timeline for when we can expect to hear an announcement on that critical factor?

Stephen Kinnock: I wish my hon. Friend all the best with his efforts to get that dental school up and running. As for the need for serious reform, there is no perfect payment system, but we have to get a payment system in place that makes NHS dentistry attractive—at least as attractive as doing work in the private sector. We are working at pace on that, and I will report back on that as rapidly as possible.

T10. [902711] Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Some 44,066 children—one in six—are waiting more than a year for medical treatment, compared with one in 100 adults. Waits are at their worst in community medicine. In Dorset, there are waits of up to two years in child development, and delays of a year are normal for child and adolescent mental health services. Fifty-three per cent of all community health referrals take more than a year. Will the Minister confirm whether the 18-week target will apply to community referrals and not just hospitals? If not, when can we expect a target, so that children are not badly affected?

Wes Streeting: The hon. Member is absolutely right to put the spotlight on paediatric health. Mental health is important for children and young people, but physical health is too. This Government are committed to dramatically reducing waiting lists and returning to the 18-week standard by the end of this Parliament, but we should aim to go even harder after those childhood waiting lists, because many children waiting in pain and agony are losing valuable years of their childhood that they will never get back.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): The Government know how hard I have worked as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for medical cannabis on or under prescription. I am pleased to hear that there is a trial, but I urge the Minister and her team to make sure that it actually goes ahead, as others have not because of Brexit, covid and elections. Can she please meet me to ensure that the APPG and I are kept up to date on the work of the NHS?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend has been a strong campaigner on this issue on behalf of her constituents, and I congratulate her on that work. We are confident that the randomised trial will go forward, and we have invested over £8.5 million in it. I am very happy to meet her, and I urge people to come forward and support the trial. That is the way forward on this issue.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): The new Health Minister has stated that it is okay for a human being to present as a llama. If I have a family member who presents as a llama and suddenly becomes ill in the middle of the night, should I send for a doctor, a vet or a straitjacket?

Wes Streeting: I can say to the hon. Member that my hon. Friend the Minister believes in treating every human being with the dignity and respect they deserve—even the hon. Gentleman.

Josh MacAlister (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): Shortly after the election, the new Government announced £4.3 million for a new community mental health hub in Whitehaven. Unfortunately, the local mental health trust

followed that decision by announcing the closure of the Yewdale ward for acute mental health services. Does the Minister agree that we need to get early intervention right before we close acute services, and will he bring together a meeting to scrutinise that decision?

Stephen Kinnock: Integrated care boards are responsible for providing mental health services to meet the needs of their local populations. As part of our plan for change, we will reduce delays and provide faster treatment. We are working with NHS England to transform mental health services, shift care from hospitals to local communities, and increase access to support for people across the country, including in rural areas.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Insomnia affects many patients, including my constituents, who are being advised by their GPs to try cognitive behavioural therapy as an alternative to medication. However, digital CBT programmes are not available on the NHS, leaving many without access to drug-free treatment. Will the Minister outline what steps the Government are taking to ensure that patients have access to digital therapies, so that more people can get access to evidence-based, drug-free support?

Wes Streeting: The hon. Gentleman hit the nail on the head when he mentioned the importance of evidence-based treatment. As part of the Government's shift from hospital to the community, from analogue to digital and from sickness to prevention, the NHS absolutely should be in this space, and we are considering those issues as we develop our 10-year plan for health.

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): The NHS South East London integrated care board provides services to my constituents, and I have discussed some ways in which we could better deliver services by redeveloping the Erith community hospital site in Northumberland Heath. Is the Minister able to provide an outline of the Government's plan to provide capital funding for expanding community services like those at Erith hospital?

Stephen Kinnock: I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend so that we can get into a bit more detail about what is happening in his constituency, but he is absolutely right to point to the need for more and better community health services. That will be at the heart of our shift from hospital to community in the 10-year plan that we are delivering.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): Health authorities in Devon are set to trial the relocation of a vital coronary service from Torbay to Exeter, which is 24 miles away. Will the Minister meet me and fellow south Devon MPs who have grave concerns about the impact on patient safety?

Wes Streeting: It is important that people are able to get the right care in the right place at the right time, and I recognise the challenges, particularly in geographies such as Devon and Cornwall, which have more rural and remote communities. In the first instance, I encourage the hon. Gentleman to take this issue up with local health leaders and his integrated care board, but Ministers are always open to receiving representations beyond that if he needs further reassurance.

Clonoe Inquest

Mr Speaker: Before I call the right hon. Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis) to ask his urgent question, I must remind hon. Members of the House's rule relating to matters sub judice: Members should not refer to any matter that is currently before the courts.

On 19 November, I granted a waiver in respect of the case of Dillon and others v. the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, given the issues of national importance raised by that case. The waiver is ongoing, and Members may refer to the case in the House. Given that the coroner's verdicts and findings in relation to the Clonoe inquest have been published, I am content for that case to be discussed in the House. However, Members should take care to avoid referring to any other active civil or criminal cases.

12.40 pm

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to make a statement on the coroner's ruling in the Clonoe inquest.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): On 16 February 1992, a heavily armed unit of the Provisional IRA carried out an attack on Coalisland police station armed with a 12.7 mm heavy machine gun and three AKM rifles. Approximately 60 rounds were fired, but thankfully no one was injured. Following the attack, the IRA unit proceeded to a car park where they were engaged by soldiers of the Army's specialist military unit. This resulted in four men, Patrick Vincent, Sean O'Farrell, Peter Paul Clancy and Kevin O'Donnell, being shot and killed by the soldiers.

On 6 February, Mr Justice Humphreys, sitting as a coroner in the inquest into the circumstances of those deaths at Clonoe chapel, found that the use of lethal force by the soldiers was unjustified and that

"the operation was not planned and controlled in such a way as to minimise to the greatest extent possible the need for recourse to lethal force."

The coroner further found that the soldiers did not hold "an honest and genuinely held belief"

that the use of force was necessary to defend themselves or others.

These are clearly very significant matters that require careful consideration. I know that the Ministry of Defence is considering the coroner's finding. Therefore there is, unfortunately, a limit to what I am able to say in relation to the findings themselves, particularly given that there is also an ongoing civil case relating to these events. However, it is clear the Government must take such findings very seriously. We owe a great debt to our armed forces—

Mr Speaker: Order. There is no sub judice to the case that you have just mentioned. We must be clear on that. So please let us not try to use that as a barrier. I just want to be clear on that.

Hilary Benn: I accept that entirely, Mr Speaker. I was merely pointing out, as I think your statement alluded to, that there is an ongoing civil case.

We owe a great debt to our armed forces. The vast majority of those who served in Operation Banner during the troubles did so with distinction. They operated in the most dangerous and difficult circumstances to protect the citizens of the United Kingdom. During the troubles, over 1,000 members of the security forces lost their lives in that endeavour. It is right that we hold our armed forces to the highest standards. We must also recognise the extreme circumstances that they faced. That is what sets them apart from the terrorist organisations who indiscriminately murdered over 3,000 people during the troubles.

David Davis: I thank the Secretary of State for taking this statement personally. I know that he did not have to, so I thank him for that. The Government gave notice at the election that they intended to remove the element of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 that protects soldiers and police who served during the troubles from prosecution. Last week's frankly speculative judgment from the Northern Ireland coroner into the Clonoe shootings now exposes a number of soldiers to potential prosecution. These are men who served their country with honour, heroism and skill, sometimes in the face of the most incredible danger. They are now mostly in their 60s and 70s and no doubt hoping for a well-earned peaceful retirement. In his statement in December, the Secretary of State of spoke of

"recognising the dedicated service of the vast majority of police officers, members of the armed forces and the security services who did so much to keep the people of Northern Ireland safe during the troubles." [*Official Report*, 4 December 2024; Vol. 758, c. 419.]

So precisely what are the Government going to do to stop the vengeful pursuit of decent patriotic people? If the Government leave them open to persecution, it will frankly be shameful and serve only to further the IRA's attempt to rewrite the history of Northern Ireland.

Hilary Benn: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for asking this urgent question. As he will be aware, this inquest was part of the five-year plan established by the former Lord Chief Justice, and because the hearings were held prior to the legacy Act 1 May cut-off, the inquest was able to be concluded. For the avoidance of doubt, it is not the result of anything that this Government have done.

The Government set out in our election manifesto and the King's Speech our commitment to repeal and replace the legacy Act, because it did something quite remarkable in uniting the political parties and communities of Northern Ireland in opposition to it. It is a fatally flawed piece of legislation that has been found, in a number of respects, to be incompatible with our obligations under the European convention on human rights. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ah!"] This Government believe in upholding our commitment to the European convention on human rights, even if other Members do not share that view.

I set out in my statement to the House of Commons in December the approach that we are taking, and I will bring forward further proposals in due course. I echo what the right hon. Gentleman said about the service of our armed forces, the police and security services during those terribly dark, difficult and bloody days of the troubles.

Adam Jooe (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis) for his urgent question and the Secretary of State for his answer. I have a simple question: what does the Secretary of State think this ruling will mean for peace and reconciliation and for bringing communities together in Northern Ireland?

Hilary Benn: That is a judgment that individuals and communities will have to make, having regard to what the coroner had to say. There have been a very large number of inquest findings in relation to the troubles, and the Government and I understand the concerns that have been raised by the coroner's findings in this case.

The fundamental problem in Northern Ireland remains the legacy of the troubles and the fact that so many people still do not have an answer to the question of what happened to their loved one. I am afraid the previous Government made, in my view, a terrible mistake in deciding that civil cases and inquests would be closed off.

I also have to point out that the legacy Act did not prevent the possibility of future prosecutions, because it is possible, even under the law as it stands today, for prosecutions to be undertaken if the independent commission finds evidence that it thinks should be passed to the independent prosecution bodies.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): Thank you for granting this UQ, Mr Speaker.

On a February night in 1992, four men—known terrorists—armed with semi-automatic weapons and a Dushka machine gun capable of firing 600 rounds a minute at a range of 1,100 yards had already attacked a Royal Ulster Constabulary police station and were planning further attacks. These terrorists called themselves an army, they carried weapons of war, they sought to kill, and they operated entirely outside the bounds of the law. Yet we are asked to believe that the use of lethal force against them was not justified. I am not a lawyer, but if this is the state of the law, then the law is an ass, and it is up to Parliament to change it.

What if this had not been on the streets of Tyrone? What if it had been on the streets of Birmingham? What if it had been in Parliament Square? Would we be asking why those men had not been arrested? Would we find it acceptable that the courts subsequently sought to punish those forces that had risked their lives for ours?

The consequences of this ruling are potentially very severe: military morale weakened, military recruitment reduced, military effectiveness diminished, and more retired servicemen in their declining years dragged before the courts for trying to protect their countrymen from terrorists. For the record, there is no Defence Minister on the Treasury Bench to hear this urgent question.

The last Government took steps to ensure that a line was drawn under court actions like the one handed down last week. This Government have said they will repeal that Act, but seven months into their tenure, they have brought forward no plans. When will the House see that legislation? When we do see it, will the Secretary of State ensure that it includes provisions to protect servicemen, such as those affected by the ruling, from prosecution?

The Secretary of State will have seen this morning the excellent report by Policy Exchange, which puts the costs of repealing the legacy Act at hundreds of millions of pounds. The return to inquests and civil cases will severely hit the budget of the Police Service of Northern Ireland. Without funding, that will inevitably reduce policing and affect national security. Will His Majesty's Government commit to underwriting that liability?

I will end by saying that if we in this House think the law is not fit for purpose, it is our job, and ours alone, to change it. That is what parliamentary sovereignty means.

Hilary Benn: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his comments. I completely understand the concerns, which he has expressed with such passion, about our armed services personnel, including in relation to this case. He has just said, "If this is the law, the law needs to be changed." Is he suggesting that the arrangements for inquests and the way in which they are conducted—coroners sitting, hearing the evidence and coming to a finding—ought to be changed? [*Interruption.*] That is a very interesting observation from His Majesty's Opposition.

The legislation passed by the last Government would have given the very terrorists who were killed in the exchange of fire, if they had survived, the ability to secure immunity from prosecution. That is what the last Government's legacy Act did. It would have given anyone—soldiers, but also terrorists—immunity from prosecution. I am afraid that this Government take the view that that was wrong and the courts have determined that that was wrong. That is why we will repeal and replace the legacy Act.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South and Mid Down) (SDLP): Throughout the troubles, both state and non-state actors committed unlawful killings that have created harm and scarred families across both our islands. Does the Secretary of State agree that his Government, working with the Northern Irish parties, must find and build bodies that honour the Stormont House obligations of articles 2 and 3-compliant investigations and ensure that no victim-maker—nobody who carries out an unlawful killing, whether UK state forces, IRA or UDA—has the right to suppress truth from families?

Hilary Benn: As I have previously indicated to the House, I am committed in all my discussions with many of those affected, including veterans, to finding a way forward that can command a degree of consensus in a way that the last Government's legacy Act failed to do. I understand the strength of feeling being expressed in the House today—I really do—but there needs to be some reflection on how a piece of legislation came to be passed that engendered almost universal opposition in Northern Ireland. The people of Northern Ireland, who, after all, lived through the troubles, did not feel that that was the right way to proceed, and time and again it has been found to be unlawful. In other words, we were left with a mess and we are doing our best to try to fix it.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): I thank the right hon. Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis) for bringing this issue to the House. The Liberal Democrats are firmly committed to the principles of truth, justice and accountability. The violence carried

[Dr Al Pinkerton]

out by the IRA during the troubles was abhorrent and inflicted deep suffering on communities across Northern Ireland. At the same time, upholding the rule of law is a fundamental principle that applies to all, including the actions of state forces.

The findings of the Clonoe inquest highlight the importance of due process and transparency in dealing with legacy issues. It is vital that families seeking answers about the past are able to access justice and that all events are subject to rigorous legal scrutiny. That is the only way to build trust and support a lasting reconciliation in Northern Ireland.

There has been immense progress in Northern Ireland since the Good Friday agreement and that progress was built on the principles of justice, democracy and accountability. We—all of us—must continue to uphold those principles if we are to secure a lasting and peaceful future for all communities.

The Secretary of State recently said that legislation to revoke the deeply flawed legacy Act, which does not command confidence across Northern Ireland, will be introduced when time allows. Will he offer details on when that might be?

Hilary Benn: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his observations. The answer to his last question is: when parliamentary time allows. As soon as I am in a position to indicate when that will be, I will tell the House.

I very much agree with what the hon. Gentleman said about the violence inflicted by terrorists being abhorrent. It is important that in this House we make it quite clear that there was always an alternative to violence: pursuing the path of peace. When people finally decided that that was the course of action that they should take, we saw a transformation in the lives of people in Northern Ireland. The tragedy is that so many people were killed and murdered before we got to the point of the Good Friday agreement.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Secretary of State asked rhetorically whether the law around inquests needs to change. The coroner had to answer four questions: where, when, who and how. He had no role in trying to answer why, but we know why: four depraved terrorists for the IRA and their warped ideology tried to destroy society and kill in our country.

Yesterday, the Defence Secretary was clear when he said that those who served in the SAS that day, “deserve, and they will receive, our fullest support.”—[*Official Report*, 10 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 21.]

I will not stand for a rewriting of the past. Does the Secretary of State agree with the Defence Secretary?

Hilary Benn: I do not support a rewriting of the past either. Of course we should stand with our armed service veterans, which is what the Ministry of Defence does. I will say, however, that the coroner—a judge—considered the facts of the case and came to an independent judgment about them. We are all of course perfectly free to express a view about the findings but, to come back to my point in answer to the Opposition spokesperson’s earlier comment: if Members argue that the coronial system applying to inquests right across the country

should—[*Interruption.*] If I may just finish the point: if they argue that the system should be changed because there is a great deal of feeling about particular findings that the coroner reached, the House should give that careful consideration before going down that road.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the Secretary of State accept that the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998 continues to apply? That means that no soldier and no terrorist, convicted of even the most heinous murders, can serve more than two years in jail. Those are the sort of compromises that have been necessary. When the Secretary of State accepts that the legacy Act would have given immunity to terrorists and soldiers alike, does he not recognise the principle of a truth recovery process, coupled with a statute of limitations, as exemplified by what happened in South Africa? Is what was good enough for Nelson Mandela not good enough for Northern Ireland?

Hilary Benn: The right hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. Societies around the world that have faced terrible conflict have each taken their own path to try to find a way forward. The release of 400 prisoners in the two years after the Good Friday agreement was a very bitter pill to swallow for many in Northern Ireland, but I support that step—it was nothing to do with me at the time—because it was the right one to take to enable the Good Friday agreement to be reached. I say to the right hon. Gentleman that I have met people, including the family of a member of our armed forces who was murdered by the IRA, who expressed to me their bitter opposition to the immunity provisions of the legacy Act.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The sharpened tension in Northern Ireland is palpable after the ruling. The day after the shooting, the Provisional IRA issued a statement boasting that the men were in the East Tyrone brigade and on active service. Mr Speaker, you and I know the Bible, and it is very clear: live by the sword, die by the sword. If you live by a machine gun that you use to shoot a police station, you die by a machine gun—that is the way that I see it. For right-thinking people in Northern Ireland, and indeed throughout this United Kingdom, to be told that the use of lethal force was not justified flies in the face of common justice, and feeds the feeling that the judiciary are not just complicit but active in their rewriting of history. What can the Secretary of State do to rectify that situation?

Hilary Benn: The findings of the coroner in this case stand for themselves and are on the record, and all of us are able to read them. In answer to the hon. Gentleman’s direct question about what the Government are doing, as I indicated to the House in my answer to the right hon. Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis), the Ministry of Defence is, of course, giving very serious consideration to what the coroner had to say.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I am astonished by the coroner’s findings. He was not asked to contemplate the question about why—getting inside the head of a soldier who is worried about whether they are going to be shot dead is very difficult. I served in Northern Ireland and some of the decisions that we had to take were instantaneous. There was no time to mull them over—it was either life or death. I lost a very good friend, Captain Robert Nairac.

The Secretary of State says that the trouble with the last legacy Act was that it gave immunity to IRA members, but they already had immunity, not just through the letters of comfort but because they kept no records, so they cannot be prosecuted. The only group that will be prosecuted will be soldiers, like myself, who never asked to go to Northern Ireland, but went because we were told to protect civilians, and who served their country. They will be dragged in front of the courts because the Government seem not to care about them.

Hilary Benn: I say to the right hon. Gentleman, who himself gave distinguished service, that I absolutely understand and recognise the point he forcefully makes about the circumstances in which our soldiers found themselves as part of Operation Banner. They had seen their comrades killed and they did not know what they were going to face; as he rightly says, in those circumstances soldiers had to make very hard split-second decisions.

The coroner had a job to do. He expressed his findings, Members of the House are expressing what they feel about those findings, and the Ministry of Defence is considering them. It is right and proper that we stand by our armed forces, which is why the Government and the Ministry of Defence give support to veterans in those circumstances. However, I would point out that many, many members of the Provisional IRA and the loyalist terrorist organisations were prosecuted, tried and convicted.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Based on the Secretary of State's earlier comments, is it not now clear that the Secretary of State believes the Government cannot stand behind our brave soldiers in this instance because of our membership of the European convention on human rights? Therefore, surely that is a perfect reason why we must leave the ECHR.

Hilary Benn: That is not the Government's position. The Government's position is indeed to stand behind our brave armed services personnel—

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): By repealing the Bill.

Hilary Benn: By repealing the Bill, indeed, which has been found repeatedly to be unlawful. I make no apology for saying to the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) and to the House that this is a Government who uphold the European convention on human rights. I recognise that some people say we should leave, which would put us in the same position as some other countries around the world with which I would not want the United Kingdom to find itself associated. The point about the European convention is that its rights are for every single citizen: those rights may accord people with a decision that Members of the House disagree with today, but tomorrow they may protect the rights of every single one of us. That is why we are committed to the ECHR.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): How will the Secretary of State ensure that veterans who served their country with distinction will not be hounded through the courts over events that may or may not have happened decades before?

Hilary Benn: As history shows, decisions about potential prosecutions are taken by independent prosecutors. Such decisions are not determined by the Government; independent prosecutors have to take decisions on the basis of the evidence and then courts have to decide whether they are going to convict or not. That is called the rule of law. A distinguished former Defence Secretary, Ben Wallace, set out very clearly that the British Army believes in the rule of law and is held to the highest standards, and I agree with him. I also agree with what the newly appointed veterans commissioner in Northern Ireland had to say about that in the comments that were reported over the weekend.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): There is tangible anger in Northern Ireland over this preposterous verdict, and the Secretary of State's limp response today will not assuage that anger. This is a Secretary of State who wants to see IRA godfather Gerry Adams paid compensation because the wrong Minister signed his detention order 50 years ago. This is a Secretary of State who has today defended the retention of a coronary system that, time without number, puts the security forces in the dock, but never the terrorists. Little wonder that confidence in the Secretary of State is haemorrhaging in Northern Ireland, and this response only underscores why.

Hilary Benn: As I made clear at Northern Ireland questions recently, the Supreme Court issued a judgment on the interim custody orders relating to internment in 2020. The previous Government knew there was a problem and, for quite a long period of time, was unable to find a solution. In the end, the solution—sections 46 and 47 of the legacy Act—has been found to be unlawful, but I have given an undertaking from the Dispatch Box that we are looking at all lawful means to prevent compensation from being paid in those circumstances. I believe that we are taking the right approach to the legacy Act.

On coroners, I say for, I think, the third time that if we have an inquest system that we support and that applies right across the piece, it is not possible to write legislation that says, "We will have the verdicts, judgments and findings that we like, but we will not have the findings that we do not like." That is a decision—*[Interruption.]* Independent coroners make those decisions in respect of individual cases. I feel the anger of many Members of the House—*[Interruption.]* Will the hon. and learned Gentleman let me finish answering the question that he put? I feel the anger that is being expressed in the House, but we have an independent legal system in this country, which is one of the foundations of our freedom.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): The IRA itself claimed the terrorists shot by the security forces at Clonoe, describing their actions that night as being "active service". They had just launched a cowardly attack on Coalisland RUC station, no doubt with murderous intent, but they met real soldiers and they lost. No doubt many innocent lives were saved by the security forces as a result of that evening: these were not innocent people, but hardened terrorists. Does the Secretary of State agree that this was a justified and necessary operation, within the guidelines of military interception, and will he condemn judicial rulings that seek to rewrite

[Carla Lockhart]

history, undermine our security forces and embolden bloodthirsty terrorists who wage war against innocent people?

Hilary Benn: I accept the characterisation that the hon. Member has ascribed to the individuals. Clearly, in firing 60 rounds at the police station, we know what their intent was. That was what the Provisional IRA and terrorists on the loyalist side did during the course of the troubles, and we have to speak of that as well. The coroner's findings are there on the record. Members and public society are perfectly entitled to express a view, and I acknowledge the concerns that Members have raised today. It is a very serious issue, and that is why it falls to the Ministry of Defence to consider the findings and what may follow.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): It is a great pity that no one from the Defence Front-Bench team is here with us because I am sure that if they were, they could confirm that the DShK machine gun that these men had is a weapon of incredible power. If we were to look around the average city block, there would be nothing that a DShK could not hit and put a bullet right through. We now sit here warm and safe and consider the actions of, as we have heard, brave men who had to take an instantaneous decision to stand up and face that weapon and the people who had already demonstrated that they were prepared to use it. It sticks in the craw that we hear the IRA described here as a "unit"—as though they were some sort of army. They style themselves as an army, but they are not an army—they are a murder gang, simple as that. Is it not the case that the ECHR now skews the balance in their favour, and that we are hide-bound by the idea that there is an equivalence between the IRA and the brave soldiers of the SAS who stood up and did what they had to do to protect innocent lives?

Hilary Benn: There is no equivalence at all—none whatsoever—for the reasons that have been set out by Members in this exchange, following the question asked by the right hon. Member for Goole and Pocklington. There is nothing in the European convention on human rights that says there must be equivalence. Our armed services personnel, the RUC, security services and others were doing their best to protect the citizens of Northern Ireland from the murderous onslaught that they were subjected to over the years of the troubles. That is why there is no equivalence between them and those who chose in those circumstances to use violence to try to advance their cause. In the end, the terrible violence that we are discussing was brought to an end by the Good Friday agreement—by people finally recognising that that is not the way to proceed.

Going back to the question asked about the cost by the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), there was an alternative cost, which is what we would have faced if the Good Friday agreement had not been successful in bringing peace to Northern Ireland. We should recognise what a significant moment it was, but we should stand with our soldiers.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): Much has been made in recognising the service of our armed forces, including the members of the RUC and the PSNI,

because not only did they defend our communities, they lived among them. Does the Secretary of State agree that the soldiers acted inside the rules of engagement in that they believed their lives were in danger from heavily armed terrorists, who were intent on murder, and that decisions taken in a split second by the military commander were, in his view, justified?

Hilary Benn: In all honesty, I have to say to the hon. Gentleman that, of course, I was not present at the time; I am not the coroner; I have not looked into the circumstances of the case; and therefore I am not in any position to answer the question that he has put to me. But I have read the summary of the coroner's findings. They of course raise serious matters, which is why the Ministry of Defence is considering them.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): As has been said, people in Northern Ireland are appalled at this decision by a coroner who, incidentally, would have had police officers protecting him during the troubles. I guarantee that had he been faced with armed terrorists and those officers had asked them to put their hands up and surrender, he would have been appalled. He would have expected them to be shot. People will be equally appalled by the measly mouthed response from the Secretary of State. Let me quote some of the things he has said: "I can't comment on this", "We have to take seriously the judgment of the coroner" and "I will defend the ECHR, even though it has been abused by terrorists." When will the Secretary of State take the side of the soldiers who fought in Northern Ireland and not be afraid that whatever he says here might offend Sinn Féin, the IRA and their supporters?

Hilary Benn: I will only say to the right hon. Gentleman that the characterisation of the views that he attempts to attribute to me is incorrect, but I make no apology for telling the House about this Government's support for the European convention, because this set of findings by the coroner has nothing to do with the European convention on human rights. The coroner was faced with a set of circumstances. He considered them and produced his findings, as inquests do all the time. People are entitled to criticise the outcome, but it is an independent coronial process.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Compounding the problems that the coroner has created with his comments is the fact that in the past whenever innocent people were killed, the judiciary has commented that attention should be drawn to those behind the scenes who send young men out to carry out the killing. These young men were sent out to kill; they had murder in their minds. It is a pity that the coroner did not mention who was behind that—why are their names not being brought to public light? Does the Secretary of State agree that something like that might have helped a little to minimise the compounding problem created by the coroner's comments at the time?

Hilary Benn: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about how we come to tell the truth about what happened; to give the families answers—I have met many of them, as have my predecessors—about what really happened. Although we will repeal and replace the legacy Act, I decided to keep and reform the independent commission because I believe it offers the best means of trying to provide those answers in the round. The

problem with the inquest system in certain cases is that it has no capacity to deal with sensitive information; the independent commission does. That is why I urge families in Northern Ireland who are still seeking answers to talk to Sir Declan Morgan and his colleagues, because he is able to produce reports that can range as widely as he thinks appropriate.

Gavin Robinson: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I do not believe that the Secretary of State would have intended to mislead the House, but I suspect that he may have misunderstood the point being made, and it has filtered into a number of his subsequent responses. In relation to the coroner and his powers, the point being made was that there are aspects of the judgment released on Thursday that are outwith the coronial law in Northern Ireland and outwith what would be expected of a judicial officer. I give the Secretary of State an opportunity to say not that the coronial law needs to change, but that the judgment does not sit within the remit and powers of the coronial system.

Mr Speaker: Does the Secretary of State wish to reply to that?

Hilary Benn: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. That is a judgment for others to make, if that is the view they take. I accept that the right hon. Gentleman has made that point, but it would be for others to consider it, and it may be a factor that the Ministry of Defence considers when it is looking at this set of rules.

Sir Julian Lewis: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Is there any way within the rules of order that I can point out how the divisiveness of the exchanges that we have just had illustrates what happens when a line is not drawn under bitter historical conflicts?

Mr Speaker: I think the right hon. Gentleman has just done that for us, and I think I have heard enough—let us move on.

US Steel Import Tariffs

1.18 pm

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business and Trade if he will make a statement on US steel import tariffs.

The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander): We have seen the proclamation issued by President Trump overnight, which enforces a full return to 25% tariffs on US steel imports on 12 March 2025. The US has so far published details only on steel, not on aluminium. The intended effect of the proclamation is to revoke existing arrangements that have avoided those tariffs, such as the UK-US resolution, as well as any separately agreed product exclusions from the tariffs.

What British industry needs and deserves is not a knee-jerk reaction but a cool and clear-headed sense of the UK's national interest, based on a full assessment of all the implications of US actions. The Minister of State for Industry is meeting representatives of the steel industry and trade unions this very afternoon, and the Secretary of State for Business and Trade is in touch with representatives of the British steel industry and will meet them in the next 24 hours. Since July, we have engaged in a systematic way with the UK steel sector, and we will continue to engage with UK industries impacted by potential tariffs.

Historically, we have benefited from a strong and balanced trade relationship with the United States—worth around £300 billion and supporting millions of jobs. In trade policy, we stand ready to work with President Trump to find solutions that work for both the United Kingdom and the United States.

Dame Harriett Baldwin: The United States is our greatest ally and our greatest single trading partner. The UK and the United States are the biggest investors in each other's economies. Yet this is a moment of great peril for the UK steel industry, because the Government have failed to engage with gusto with the new US Administration. The Prime Minister has not, despite his many air miles, got on a flight to the States at the first possible opportunity, and years of student politics-style insults hurled at the President by Government Front Benchers has put our relationship in jeopardy. And that was before the embarrassment of the Chagos islands situation showed that we have terrible negotiators running the country.

Can the Minister confirm what conversations he or the Secretary of State have had with their counterparts in the United States about steel tariffs? How many times has the Minister spoken with US trade representatives about this matter since Sunday? Will he confirm that the first 500,000 tonnes of steel to the US will be tariff-free, as they were under President Trump's previous Administration? What economic analysis has the Department produced on the impact of the tariffs on jobs and on the wider UK economy, and what plans do the Government have to reciprocate with tariffs on US steel and aluminium, or on any other US goods? What are the Minister's plans for the safeguarding measures against steel dumping, which expire in June?

[*Dame Harriett Baldwin*]

We on the Conservative Benches have been calling on the Government to strain every sinew for a trade deal with the United States. Much work was done by the Department last time President Trump was in the White House. Will the Minister finally set out what plans the Government have to obtain a big, beautiful free-trade agreement with the United States?

Mr Alexander: Well, well—let me try to answer the various questions that the shadow Minister asks. First, on the big, beautiful deal that the Conservatives contemplated, I simply observe that that was one of a whole number of trade deals that they boast about but abjectly failed to deliver.

The hon. Lady described this as a moment of great peril for the UK steel industry. Frankly, we saw the UK steel industry suffer from a degree of neglect for many years under the previous Government. That is why we are the first Government in many years to set out a comprehensive steel strategy, including a commitment of £2.5 billion towards the future of the steel industry. We will take no lectures from Conservative Front Benchers on the UK steel industry.

On the hon. Lady's substantive question about the degree of contact that we have had with the US trade representative, it may have eluded her attention that we do not yet have a confirmed US trade representative. We anticipate that Jamieson Greer will be confirmed by the US Senate in the next couple of weeks. Similarly, she might suggest that it is important for the Secretary of State to meet Howard Lutnick, the US Secretary of Commerce, but, alas, I must inform her that Howard Lutnick has not yet been confirmed. We stand ready to engage with the incoming Administration—be that with the USTR or the Secretary of Commerce—once we are in a position to do so.

In terms of the economic analysis, I hope the hon. Lady will understand, given how sensitive these issues are as we anticipate the further steps to be taken by the Trump Administration, that it would not be an altogether wise negotiating strategy to share the detail of the internal UK analysis of the potential effects of tariffs, which, I remind the House, are not due to be imposed until 12 March.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): What is essential now is that this does not escalate. Widespread duties on UK exports to the US would be devastating for economic growth, bad for inflation and bad for interest rates. The whole House ought to wish His Majesty's new ambassador, Lord Mandelson, the very best of luck in the conduct of his new tasks in Washington. What flexibility will the Minister allow on increasing funding to UK steelmakers through the steel strategy if they confirm that that is essential to maintain a sovereign capability in this country?

Mr Alexander: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his generous words about the incoming UK ambassador to Washington, who—withstanding his commitment at the weekend to fly under the radar—is already in post and is making necessary calls. He is but one of the key

interlocutors we have established with the incoming Administration, and—reflecting the earlier questions that we were asked—we are already actively engaged with the US Administration.

More broadly on the approach to the UK steel industry, my friend and colleague the Minister of State for Industry is this afternoon meeting representatives of the steelmaking trade unions and representatives of the principal steel companies in the United Kingdom. The Secretary of State will further that dialogue in the next 24 hours. There has already been outreach to the UK Steel trade body. In relation to the commitment for the steel strategy that we are due to unveil in the spring, I can assure my right hon. Friend that there is already a very active dialogue that will incorporate issues related not just to potential tariffs but to the risks of trade diversion, and to the substantive issues that he raises.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): Donald Trump's tariffs will cause much uncertainty across the world, not least for those working in our great British steel industry. Tariffs are not just bad news for UK steel producers; they would have a tangible effect on people's lives, from lower economic growth to higher inflation. It is not likely to end with steel, so we may well be caught up in America's economic vandalism. Will the Minister set out how US tariffs may affect the UK economy and what preparations are being made as a result, and does he agree that British jobs are on the line and that businesses and workers want to see the Government stand up for them?

Mr Alexander: To give a sense of quantum to the House, about £400 million-worth of UK steel exports go to the United States. That represents, if I recollect accurately, about 10% of UK production, so the hon. Gentleman is entirely right to recognise that this is a significant moment.¹ We take that very seriously, which is why we are engaging in dialogue with both the workforce and the owners of the various steel producers here in the United Kingdom. More broadly, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North (Liam Byrne) alluded to, we want to avoid a significant escalation. We saw retaliatory measures taken under the first Trump Administration. It feels to me that this is an opportunity for the UK to exercise a cool head and a clear-eyed sense of where the national interest lies. These tariffs will not be imposed until 12 March, which gives us time to undertake the dialogue that is already under way, to reach a judgment on the basis of the analysis that we have already done, and to ensure that our interlocutors in Washington and elsewhere are engaged in a constructive and mature dialogue.

Patrick Hurley (Southport) (Lab): It is quite evident that tariffs will have a negative impact on the UK economy. Among all the palaver in the imposition of tariffs, the impact on workers—on their jobs and livelihoods—is often forgotten. In formulating a response to the proposed tariffs, I ask that we work closely with trade union representatives to ensure that the workers are not forgotten in all of this.

Mr Alexander: I am happy to give that assurance. I should probably declare an interest as a member of the Community trade union. I can assure the House that trade unions—whether Community, the GMB,

1.[*Official Report*, 12 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 6WC.] (Correction)

Unite or the other representatives of steelworkers—have been a central part of the dialogue that we started in July. Frankly, we inherited a situation in which there had been significant under-investment in steel capability in the United Kingdom for many years. We are backing up that commitment to dialogue with an act of commitment to public funds, and we are doing so in dialogue with the workforce as well as with the companies themselves.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): The Minister is quite right that we do not want a knee-jerk reaction, but I gently point out to him that this announcement should not have come as a surprise, bearing in mind the President's comments both before and after the inauguration. Many of my constituents who work at the Scunthorpe steelworks already face an uncertain future, and this will just increase their concerns. Can the Minister give an assurance that he will report back to the House as soon as possible about the meetings that will take place over the next day or two?

Mr Alexander: There are plenty of opportunities for Ministers to be held accountable in relation to the dialogue that we have started, and that we continue, with steel producers in the United Kingdom.

Turning to the hon. Gentleman's initial point about whether this announcement has come as a surprise, candidly, it has not. However, it is also fair to recognise that the new President has a speciality in generating uncertainty—part of his style of negotiations is creating uncertainty as to what will happen next. As I sought to suggest in my opening answers, we have answers on steel today, but the proclamation that emerged overnight did not give us answers on aluminium. In those circumstances, it is right and reasonable to be mindful of the statements that have been made, which I can assure the House that we were, and to undertake analysis, which I can assure the House we are also continuing to review and reach a judgment on.

At the same time, we should recognise that the date on which these tariffs come into effect is 12 March. As a consequence, there is a window of opportunity to not only engage with the workforce and the companies to ensure that we better understand exactly what they are looking for in light of these specific measures, but critically, to engage directly with the Trump Administration. That is work to which our ambassador is already turning his mind.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Let us not forget that steel is a strategically important industry, both for our economy and our national security, and if other countries are going to be protecting their steel industry, our Government must not be afraid to make the big fiscal choices required to protect our own. Will the Minister assure the House that responding to these tariffs will be a priority for this Government, as will putting the industry on a sure footing in the years ahead?

Mr Alexander: In terms of being willing to make the big fiscal choices, we have committed £2.5 billion of public money since July to support the steel industry, with resources being funnelled in part through the national wealth fund. I can assure my hon. Friend that we have already been willing to put money, as well as commitment, behind the steel industry. He is absolutely right to recognise the strategic significance of this industry,

not just on its own terms but much more broadly to the manufacturing capability of the United Kingdom. He has alluded to the risk of trade diversion, given the potential remedial action taken by other trading blocs, so I also want to assure him that we have protections that will remain in place until 2026. There are safeguards in place in relation to trade diversion, as well as the UK's ability to act independently.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): I have listened very carefully to what has been said this morning. We have known since November that this was coming, even though the press were saying that we would somehow get a special relationship. What is clear today is that Trump shows strength towards countries that are in a position of weakness, which is where the UK currently is. Is it not now time for this Government to think very seriously about being back in the EU, where there is strength against strength through the customs union and the single market? We do not know what else is coming down the line, and Scottish businesses need to know the future—it could be whisky, it could be fish or it could be manufacturing. Can the Minister give us some assurance about how he will stand up to the strength of global protectionism?

Mr Alexander: In terms of an understanding of Scottish business, again I should probably declare an interest, given that the Glenkinchie distillery is in the Lothian East constituency. Only this morning, I met with Chivas Regal and Diageo, so I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I am fully aware. Certainly, no one party should claim to speak for Scotland, or for Scotland's businesses.

As for the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union, it is no secret that I was a remain campaigner and wanted the United Kingdom to stay within the European Union in 2016. I would gently point out to the hon. Gentleman that had his party been successful in its endeavour to break up the United Kingdom in 2014, the direct and immediate consequence of that choice would have been Scotland's departure from the European Union.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): In his response, the Minister mentioned the previous Conservative Government's neglect of the steel industry—it was allowed to decline to a size smaller than the industry in Belgium. Does he agree that the UK's market presents a great commercial opportunity for investment in steel, and that through this Government's steel strategy, we have the opportunity to attract that investment to the UK?

Mr Alexander: I am very happy to give my hon. Friend the assurance that he seeks. We have a comprehensive plan for steel, which, sadly, we have not had in this country for a number of years. That plan is backed up by significant public resources, which again were not available under the previous Government, and we look forward to publishing a comprehensive strategy for steel in the spring of this year.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): If President Trump offered to cancel the tariff on steel imports in return for the UK throwing the appalling Chagos giveaway deal in the dustbin, would the Government agree?

Mr Alexander: Tempting though it is to indulge in the hypothetical negotiating strategy ventriloquised through the right hon. Gentleman, consistent with the approach

[Mr Douglas Alexander]

that we need to take a considered view of what is emerging—and is still emerging, in the case of aluminium—the responsible thing to do is leave those matters with the good offices of the UK's ambassador to the United States and the Foreign Secretary.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): The reality is that countries across the globe are moving towards a protectionist model, while at the same time we are still importing 68% of the steel we need. There is clearly an opportunity here for the UK. Next year, our steel safeguards come to an end, at the same time as the EU introduces its carbon border adjustment mechanism tariff protections. Does the Minister agree that we have to move at pace to replace those protections and back our steel industry in the same way that other countries are choosing to?

Mr Alexander: I can assure the House that we are determined to back our steel sector. The Minister for Industry will be at Sheffield Forgemasters tomorrow; as I say, she is meeting representatives of the steel industry today, and the Secretary of State will be meeting representatives over the next 24 hours. We have established a steel council and a comprehensive plan for steel, we have committed significant public resources, and we will publish a comprehensive strategy in the spring of this year. We take steel seriously, which, sadly, was not the case for our predecessors.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): It is no secret that President Trump loves tariffs and intended to use them, and the Minister is coming across as a little complacent in his approach. Can he clarify whether any discussions have taken place with the Administration about continuing tariff-free quotas for British steel since the inauguration? Presumably, the Prime Minister did not raise that matter during his call. Does the Minister also concur that agreeing such protections is made harder by this Government's failure to commit to spend 2.5% of GDP on defence?

Mr Alexander: It is a matter of public record that the Prime Minister has had a couple of warm exchanges with the incoming President-elect of the United States, which I think is entirely right and appropriate. We now have a new UK ambassador, and I pay due tribute to the work of Karen Pierce, his predecessor, who did an exemplary job on behalf of the United Kingdom during the period of transition. It remains an indisputable fact, however, that Howard Lutnick is not yet in office as the US Commerce Secretary, and that Jamieson Greer is not in place as the US trade representative. Those are the individuals through whom these dialogues are normally conducted.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I echo Labour Members' support for steel as a nationally important infrastructure industry that we must protect in this country. Further to the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash) and of my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North (Liam Byrne), the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee—who is no longer in the Chamber—I also agree that we must try to avoid escalation. Part of that is about our relationship with

Europe, which is our largest market for exported steel after America, so can the Minister update us on what conversations he has had with his European counterparts? This issue of CBAM is absolutely critical to the British steel industry, which is on its knees after 15 years of a Conservative Government who failed to see its value. Will he also reassure us that the resolution of the emissions trading scheme is still on the agenda for the May talks with Europe?

Mr Alexander: I can assure my hon. Friend that we are working on that EU reset, and continue to work on it, through the good offices of my new colleagues in the Cabinet Office. One element of that reset is looking at those linkages and how they can work effectively, and the level of engagement in relation to that reset is significantly ramping up. Again, frankly, there had to be almost confidence-building measures established after the deep betrayal of trust that was felt by our European friends, neighbours and allies—let us remember that a previous Conservative Prime Minister could not even bring herself to acknowledge President Macron as a friend and ally of the United Kingdom. In that sense, we have built the relationships, we have established trust, and we are looking forward with a clear-headed sense of national interest to the reset talks that are getting under way this year.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): The threat to the UK steel industry is not tariffs from the US, but the cost of our electricity. The Business Secretary has previously agreed with me that that is what makes our steel industry uncompetitive, and it is why imports have grown from 55% to some 70% in the last couple of years. So will the new steel strategy, due in the next few weeks, confirm how we will get down the electricity price in this country to make our industry competitive?

Mr Alexander: I think the difficulty with the point the hon. Gentleman makes—and I appreciate his constituency interest and the broader interests of Lincolnshire in this—is that other factors need to be recognised and addressed in the steel strategy. There is again, for example, the indisputable fact that we inherited blast furnaces that were increasingly out of date relative to technologies being used elsewhere. There had also been years of neglect in a number of plants in which there is a significant need for both public and private investment. So I respectfully hear the point that the hon. Gentleman makes about electricity prices and general power generation prices in the United Kingdom. The challenge of energy prices is not unique to the United Kingdom, but is felt across the whole of the continent of Europe. However, there are other factors that we are going to have to address as part of a comprehensive plan for steel.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): I commend the Minister and the Government for their work on the steel strategy so far, but these are anxious times. British steel is a byword for British pride in our communities, jobs and the products we produce. I am worried not just about the exports, but about some of the steel dumping, on which we have had conversations, given our need to get growing as an economy. Does the Minister recognise not just that this is an issue for the communities that many hon. Members represent, but that it is an issue of national pride in places such as Peterborough and the country as a whole that we get this right?

Mr Alexander: My hon. Friend is a doughty defender of the interests of Peterborough and of his constituents, and he is right to recognise that pride in steel making extends beyond Port Talbot, Scunthorpe, historically Motherwell and other locations of significant steel capability. On the specific point he raises, of course there remains a residual power available to individual companies under the Trade Remedies Authority to take action on dumping perceived to be happening. However, I reassure the House that the UK's steel safeguards do and will remain in place until the end of June 2026, and I hope that offers him some comfort.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): The attacks on the last Conservative Government might carry more weight if this Government were not planning to equalise our carbon price with the European carbon price, but that is by the by.

Given the conduct of China over the years, measures to hold down production costs in other countries and now President Trump's tariffs, will the Minister accept that, if international free trade was not always a myth, it certainly is dead today, and will he commit to abandoning the theories and policies that follow his logic? Comparative advantage is used as intellectual cover for outsourcing production jobs and prosperity to countries that cheat the system. So can we see some trade realism and a strategy—a real strategy—to cut industrial energy costs, keep us making virgin steel, and get us manufacturing and exporting more?

Mr Alexander: If the hon. Gentleman has an appetite for trade realism, let us get real: the Prime Minister for whom he worked failed to do a US-UK trade deal. Let us also get real about the fact that the central underpinnings of the party of which he is a member at the time of the Brexit referendum—that we were in a less protectionist world, that we would have a functioning World Trade Organisation system and, indeed, that we would have major trading blocs seeking to take barriers down rather than put barriers up—have all been misplaced. His leader, the now Leader of the Opposition, generously conceded a couple of weeks ago that there was no growth plan following the United Kingdom's exit from the EU. It is for this Government to clean up the mess that his Government left.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): Under WTO rules, any country can impose tariffs when it believes there is unfair subsidy of the exports presented by the other country, but so far I have not heard America put forward any argument that there is unfair subsidy of our steel industry. What discussions is the Minister having with the WTO about this?

Mr Alexander: I can assure my hon. Friend that we are in regular dialogue with the WTO. I was in touch only this morning with Simon Manley, our exemplary

British ambassador in Geneva. We were also very clear at an early stage—since July—that we were backing Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala as the next director general of the WTO. I had the great privilege of working with Ngozi when I was the UK governor of the World Bank during a previous era of Labour Government. The UK is committed to standing behind her exemplary leadership of the WTO at an admittedly very challenging time for global trade.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): To use football parlance, President Trump is playing a blinder with his tariffs strategy. Canada, Mexico and Colombia all fell into line when he threatened tariffs. Only the EU is foolishly saying that it wants to go toe to toe with him. Can the Minister assure us that our Government, using our Brexit freedoms, will put Britain first when it comes to this issue, and that we will not side with the EU, but will work with the American Administration to protect British jobs and British industry?

Mr Alexander: While I may not agree with that characterisation of the efficacy of the US President's actions in recent weeks, it is a matter of record that we stand ready to work with the United States to broaden and deepen our trading and economic relationship. We are significant investors in each other's countries, and that trading relationship matters. The previous Government abjectly failed to secure the trade deal that they promised—the big promise at the time of the Brexit referendum—but with a clear sense of the national interest, and a willingness to engage with open minds, we are ready to have this conversation with the United States.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his answers. The time is coming, and I hope we will have better news for the future. President Trump has been very clear that he wishes to work with the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and to build on the friendship that already exists, but he is also clear that America comes first. He is a businessman, and we have to acknowledge that. What consideration has been given to addressing the tariff issue with him, and to securing a deal for our businesses? He has made it clear that he is prepared to give and take, and we have much to offer in this very special relationship that we both savour.

Mr Alexander: If one observes the comments made by the Chancellor last night, or by the incoming British ambassador in Washington, it is clear that we are ready to engage in a thoughtful, pragmatic way with the new Administration in Washington, and we want to broaden and deepen the trading relationship. I observe that under the first Trump presidency, bilateral trade between the United States and the United Kingdom increased, and we have ambitions to see that continue.

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

Nurse (Use of Title)

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

1.47 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about the use of the title of nurse; and for connected purposes.

I thank the Minister for Secondary Care for being here for this debate. I thank the incredible #ProtectNurse campaign, led by Professor Alison Leary MBE and Paul Trevatt, as well as nursing organisations, such as the Queen's Nursing Institute and the Institute of Health Visiting, and charities. I also thank Unison Health, Unite, the Royal College of Nursing's professional nursing committee, and the many other people and groups who are supporting this change.

I am honoured to have worked on this for many years. My Bill is about protecting the public and respecting the training, qualifications and experience of registered nurses. I am sure it will come as a shock to many people here and watching this that anyone can call themselves a nurse. They can print out a business card and start work, and it would be fine—that is currently legal. Even those who have been struck off the Nursing and Midwifery Council register for serious misconduct or those who have a criminal conviction can continue calling themselves a nurse. That is unacceptable, and actually quite dangerous.

When we hear “nurse”, we automatically think of somebody who is qualified. I am sure we have all done it: somebody says they are a nurse, and we say, “Can you look at this rash for me?”, or “I’m feeling a bit of pain in my left side,” and we start giving personal information. We trust them because we trust the title of nurse. It is about time that we showed the nursing community just how much we value and appreciate their qualifications, because we know how important nurses are in society. We clapped for them during covid. They were on the frontline, and they saved many people's lives, so this change is well overdue. When I think about nurses, I also think about my cancer nurse, Aimee, and how amazing and special she is. This Bill and this campaign are also a tribute to her.

In 2021, I tabled an amendment to the Health and Care Bill that received the support of 240 MPs—an enormous number. We thought we would get the amendment over the line, but it was a shame that the last Conservative Government used their majority to vote it down. Now that we have a Labour Government, I am hopeful and confident that we can amend the law to protect the title of nurse. At the end of the day, the first role of a Government is to protect their citizens, and my Bill would go some way to doing that.

A freedom of information request by *Nursing Standard* found that across 93% of all NHS trusts, there were more than 8,000 people with the term “nurse” in their job title who in fact had no registered nursing qualifications. That is worrying, and the numbers are incredible. We know the problem, so what is the solution? It is clear: the simplest way to rectify this issue is to amend the Professional Qualifications Act 2022 by adding “nurse” to “registered nurse”, a term that is already regulated by the Nursing and Midwifery Council, so this would not need to be part of regulatory reform. That is all we have to do. We have done a lot of work and research with lots

of professionals, and importantly my Bill will recognise existing and protected titles, such as veterinary nurse and dental nurse, which would not be affected.

The Royal College of Nursing passed a resolution in favour of protecting the “nurse” title at its congress in 2022. Those in the profession know exactly what must be done, and we cannot wait any longer to do it, because we know how dangerous the current situation can be for patients. Cassandra Grant, 39, is a dangerous fantasist who posed as a nurse at the Blenheim Palace horse trials. She was jailed for four years. She was involved in injecting an injured rider. She repeatedly lied about having medical and mental health qualifications, and the judge said it made his “blood run cold” to think of Grant

“getting her hands on a patient”.

Kate Shemirani was a nurse who claimed that 5G caused covid symptoms and spread vaccine misinformation. She was struck off, but she was still legally able to call herself a nurse. Lee Woods, a 28-year-old man, was arrested and charged in connection with impersonating a member of the nursing staff at Queen Elizabeth University hospital in Glasgow. Unfortunately, I could go on listing cases where the title of nurse has been exploited in this way, so it is important that we legislate. Building on the hard work of the #ProtectNurse campaign, I hope that the Labour Government can improve the legislation.

Since taking office, the Labour Government have made great strides on rebuilding our NHS, after 14 years of consistent neglect. I urge the Government to support my Bill as part of their vital package of reforms, and to help bring about this simple, common-sense and long-overdue change for nurses and patients. It is overwhelmingly backed by those in the profession. Given the growing public concern, now is the time for this change.

I was first elected to this House in 2005—it seems like a lifetime ago—and I am here to represent my constituents of Brent East. Thanks to all the boundary changes, it was Brent South, then Brent Central, and is now Brent East. This is a most important piece of legislation. It can change everybody's lives. It lets nurses know that we appreciate them, and allows patients to have confidence in people who call themselves a nurse. It is a simple and easy step.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Dawn Butler, Paulette Hamilton, Tulip Siddiq, Mrs Sharon Hodgson, Barry Gardiner, Juliet Campbell and Clive Lewis present the Bill.

Dawn Butler accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 28 March, and to be printed (Bill 182).

WATER (SPECIAL MEASURES) BILL [LORDS] (PROGRAMME) (NO. 2)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Water (Special Measures) Bill [Lords] for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 16 December 2024 (Water (Special Measures) Bill [Lords] (Programme):

Consideration of Lords Message

(1) Proceedings on the Lords Message shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after their commencement.

Subsequent stages

(2) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(3) The proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—(*Jeff Smith.*)

Question agreed to.

Water (Special Measures) Bill [Lords]*Consideration of Lords message*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I confirm that nothing in the Lords message engages Commons financial privilege.

Clause 1

RULES ABOUT REMUNERATION AND GOVERNANCE

1.56 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): I beg to move,

That this House insists on Commons Amendment 1 to which the Lords have disagreed, disagrees to Lords Amendment 1B, to the words restored to the Bill by the Lords' disagreement to Commons Amendment 1, and proposes Amendments (a) and (b) to the Bill in lieu of the words left out by Commons Amendment 1.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): With this, it will be convenient to consider the following Government motion:

That this House insists on Commons Amendment 2 to which the Lords have disagreed, and proposes Amendment (a) in lieu of the words so left out.

Emma Hardy: I am delighted to have another opportunity to debate this transformative Bill in this Chamber. I thank all Members for continuing to take an interest in this important piece of legislation, which demonstrates our shared commitment to improving the water sector. Today, this House will consider amendments made in the other place.

I recognise that there is huge interest across this House in wider issues relating to water. Though our debate today is solely focused on the changes made to the Water (Special Measures) Bill in the other place during the Lords' consideration of Commons amendments on 5 February, I look forward to future opportunities to discuss wider concerns and actions, for example through work relating to the independent commission.

I turn first to the changes made in the other place that would require water companies to regularly report to Ofwat on their financial structure, and to ensure that that information could be readily accessed and understood by the public. It is important to highlight that water companies are already required under their licences to publish by a set date financial performance metrics within their annual performance reports. That includes the interest on their borrowings, their financial flows and an analysis of their debt. If water companies do not comply with these licence conditions, Ofwat can take enforcement action, including issuing fines.

However, the Government recognise that there is an opportunity to make financial data more accessible for members of the public. The Government have therefore worked at pace with Lord Cromwell and Ofwat to develop a way to achieve our shared objective of improving the transparency and accessibility of reporting on key financial metrics. The insertion of a new section 35E into the Water Industry Act 1991 will make it clear that water companies should provide an intelligible overview of their financial position at least once a year. That overview should include a summary of the significant changes that have taken place over the past 12 months, and will cover key aspects of water companies' financial position, such as their share capital and debt.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): Ofwat has said that it believes that the right level of debt should be 60%, yet it has taken no action against those companies whose level of debt has risen to as much as 80%. Can the Minister assure us that under the Bill, Ofwat will not only have the power to act when companies' debt levels are too high, but will use it?

Emma Hardy: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I know how much he cares about this and many environmental issues. Amendment (a) refers only to the reporting arrangements for levels of debt rather than specifying the levels of debt that would be acceptable. It is about increased transparency, whereas his points fall more into the remit of the water commission, which is looking at all those issues as part of its wider work. I stress that the amendment is just about how information is reported and transparency.

The information must be made available in a prominent place on the water company's website, ensuring accessibility for members of the public. Subsection (4) of proposed new section 35E also provides Ofwat with the power to determine the information that a water company must publish, as well as the ability to review requirements on financial reporting from time to time. That addition will ensure that reporting requirements keep pace with changes in the expectations and needs of bill payers. I would like to be clear, however, that the Government expect the power to be used to ensure that reporting requirements remain relevant, rather than to dilute or diminish the ambition of reporting requirements.

Financial reporting will also continue to be underpinned by pre-existing statutory obligations and licence conditions. In line with other requirements brought forward in clause 1, this new requirement will commence on Royal Assent. These amendments will help to rebuild public trust in the sector and provide the public with the levels of openness and transparency that they deserve.

I turn to the other Government amendment, which relates to the requirement for Ofwat's rules to be confirmed by way of affirmative statutory instrument, as reintroduced by the motion tabled by Lord Blencathra in the other place. While the Government recognise that there were calls in the other place for increased parliamentary oversight of Ofwat's rules, we have significant concerns that a requirement for Ofwat's rules to be finalised through an affirmative statutory instrument would delay the rules being implemented.

We are clear that Ofwat's rules should be brought forward as soon as possible. That will ensure swift and meaningful improvements in the performance and culture of water companies as they begin to deliver on the largest investment package in the history of the water sector. Requiring the rules to be confirmed by statutory instrument would risk delay to the rules coming into force. We also maintain concerns that the Lords amendments would compromise the independence of Ofwat, because they would require Ofwat's rules to be confirmed through legislation prepared by the Government. That independence must be protected if we are to ensure investor confidence in the water sector.

The Government are confident that the Bill already provides for sufficient scrutiny of Ofwat's rules as it is required to conduct a statutory consultation on the rules before they are finalised. Separately, Ofwat has already concluded an initial policy consultation on a

draft of the rules and how they will apply. It received 11,700 responses on the rules through its consultation, which it is actively considering. As such, the Government are seeking to reverse the requirement and to introduce provisions in its place that will require Ofwat to provide its first set of rules in draft to the Secretary of State at least seven days before they are issued. I hope that hon. Members across the House will support that change, which will ensure that Ofwat's rules are put into place as soon as possible following Royal Assent, in addition to the Government's amendments to introduce new financial reporting requirements.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak in this final stage of the Bill. Before I start my remarks, I will respond to the pertinent question about levels of borrowing for water companies asked by my friend and former colleague on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner). The Minister is right that Government amendment (a) is about reporting rather than the levels of borrowing. It is regrettable that the Government chose to reject the Conservative amendment in Committee that would have allowed the Secretary of State to set the amounts of borrowing for water companies. I hope that, as we move towards Cunliffe review, the Government may look at that again so that we can have tighter control on the water companies and their levels of debt.

Before I make my remarks on the Lords messages, I will say that getting to the Bill to this stage has been the result of much hard work across this House and the other place. I thank everyone, both front of house and behind the scenes, who has worked hard to get us here. That includes: the Minister for her willingness to listen to those across the House throughout the Bill's passage; similarly, her counterpart in the other place, Baroness Hayman; those who have worked to draft the Bill and amendments; the Bill Committee; parliamentary staff from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; and campaign groups and stakeholders who provided their insights to the Committee to help make the Bill even stronger, not least the Conservative Environment Network, the Angling Trust, and the Wildlife and Countryside Link.

Sadly, however, as the Opposition have stressed throughout the Bill's passage in this House and the other place, this final stage of the Bill risks being yet another missed opportunity to act holistically on this important issue. It is unfortunate that the Government have been unwilling to go much further than their copy-and-paste approach, rebooting measures that the Conservatives took in government to address this issue.

We heard in previous stages how the bans on bonuses for water company chief executives and ensuring that 100% of storm overflows are monitored—up from 7% under Labour—were introduced by the previous Conservative Government. None the less, ever the optimist, I came to the Chamber hoping that the Government might be willing to reconsider their position on the issues of the amendments and the reasoning from the other place, which cover familiar ground. We debated these issues in the previous stages, not only in this House but in the other place.

At the heart of the Lords amendments is a theme that His Majesty's most loyal Opposition have emphasised throughout the Bill's passage: accountability. The previous

lack of accountability for water companies created many of the issues that the water industry has faced. The Conservatives in government and now this Government have attempted to try and address that. This is another chance for the Government to go even further and inject some of what is really needed into their approach.

I turn to Lords amendment 1B, which reverses the Government's decision to remove measures from the Bill that would require financial reporting to be collected by Ofwat for its remuneration guidance. We know that one of the most worrying aspects of our water industry has been its financial resilience, as Ofwat's "Monitoring financial resilience" report back in November made clear, with 10 companies at need of increased monitoring and three in the highest category of risk, with closer monitoring required at a more senior level with Ofwat.

We all know, too, the cases involving specific water companies and the real risk that financial mismanagement brings for the survival of those companies and the water provision that their consumers rely on. It is disappointing, therefore, that the Government have been unwilling throughout the Bill's passage to accept Conservative amendments, or Cross-Bench amendments such as this one by Lord Cromwell, offered in a constructive spirit, which may have gone some way to address the issue. None the less, the Opposition truly want to see better financial resilience. Therefore, on financial reporting in particular, we want the Government to accept this as a reasonable step to regain accountability on financial resilience.

The Lords amendment to clause 1 would quite simply mean that, when it comes to financial reporting, there would be nowhere to hide for water companies and the decisions they make in this area. I note that, following the Lords' rejection of Commons amendment 1, the Government have tabled amendment (a) to Lords amendment 1B, which will go some way to improving the financial transparency of water companies, as a formal concession to Lords amendment 1B.

Subsection (4) of Government amendment (a) states that what water companies must publish should be decided "from time to time". I hope the Minister can see that such vagueness might be a problem moving forward, as "from time to time" could allow the regulator not to review when the need arises, because it had done so a few years prior or even longer ago, and justify that by arguing that it was doing so "from time to time", as the law outlines. Even if nothing or little would need changing from year to year, or every few years, surely it would be better to require this at least to be reviewed at precise regular intervals so that the most valuable information is provided in the best possible format.

That aside, however, His Majesty's most loyal Opposition acknowledge the Government's concession on financial transparency, and indeed public access, including characteristics of capital and debt. We are pleased to see that addition to the Bill.

In the same spirit, I move on to Lords reason 2A to disagree with Commons amendment 2, which urges this House to consider again the requirement that any rules under clause 1 be brought into force by means of a statutory instrument from the Secretary of State. Again, this amendment is familiar territory that we have debated at many stages, having been a measure consistently called for by His Majesty's Opposition in the other place and in this House, both in the Chamber and in

Committee. We have maintained throughout that accountability is needed to deliver and enforce change in the water industry, but that must include the Government of the day, no matter which party they are.

It is odd that, on the one hand, this Government have claimed that they want a tight grip on water companies, while on the other, they consistently oppose a measure that would allow them to do exactly that. It is odd, too, that in Committee, the Liberal Democrats sought to amend the same part of the Bill that would have that effect. Their intentions were to bring in guidance as soon as possible, but there is a distinction between intent and effect. Removing some of the same lines would have had the same exact effect in ridding the Bill of the statutory instrument requirement that this amendment seeks to maintain.

The Government have argued—as the Minister has again today—that they fear that Ofwat's flexibility to adapt their rules as necessary could be impeded in some way. But statutory instruments remain a timely measure to introduce any changes if needed. So once again, the Government's argument does not stack up. It is only right that we, as parliamentarians elected by the British public to represent their interests with our voices and votes, are able to look at the proposed rules and exercise our ability to voice concerns if they risk falling short of protecting the public's interests. Why deny the public and Members of this House the ability to uphold accountability of the water industry, which has been missing for too long? As such, once again we have urged the Government to accept what we believe is a reasonable set of amendments in the name of accountability.

Now, at the 11th hour, the Government have tabled Government amendment (a) in lieu of Lords reason 2A that disagrees with Commons amendment 2, the amendments tabled and argued for by my Conservative friends in the other place the noble Lord Roborough and Lord Blencathra, and add that the remuneration and governance rules may not be enacted until they have been provided in draft to the Secretary of State. There is a move towards some Government accountability, but sadly, not what the Opposition had wanted: a statutory instrument laid by the Secretary of State and approved by both Houses.

None the less, I am grateful that the Government have listened to Lord Roborough, me and the other Conservative colleagues who have argued for more accountability, and that they have moved a little towards us with this amendment. However, I am still unclear why the Government appear scared of full accountability. Sadly, I fear that some of these last-minute concessions, which we would like to go further, look like the Government trying to avoid double insistence and the Bill failing. We do not wish the Bill to fail, as we all want the same thing: to see our waters improve and for the Government to continue with the measures that the Conservatives set in train in the last Parliament. In that spirit, we will not stand in the way of the Government's amendments.

There has been many a chance for the Government to grab opportunities to bolster the Bill with both hands. Many chances have been missed throughout its passage, not least by the Government continually rejecting our water restoration fund to ringfence fines to restore local waterways, rather than to balance the Treasury's books. They did not accept our sensible proposals to go further with nature-based solutions to flood risk. They rejected

[Dr Neil Hudson]

our proposals for fines on water companies to result in equivalent reductions in customers' bills, and our sensible proposals to allow the Secretary of State to place limits on the amount that water companies can borrow. They blocked our proposals to protect consumers in different parts of the country from paying for failing water companies that do not supply them.

As the Bill progresses and the Cunliffe review begins, I again urge the Government, for the sake of our water, environment, constituents, communities and, indeed, fairness, not to let political pride and dogma stand in the way of doing the right thing and making water legislation the best it can be. We wish the Bill well as it ends its journey in this House.

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

2.15 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a pleasure to be back talking about the Bill again. In Committee and on Report, the Liberal Democrats put down a grand total of 56 amendments. What is two more? We believe, as the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson) said, that this Bill is a good thing, and we wish to see it on the statute book, but we do not feel it goes far enough, and the two amendments before us today give us the opportunity to consider it a little more.

Through amendment (a) the Government want to introduce financial reporting requirements for water companies. The report, to be required once a year, should be a concise, intelligible and up-to-date overview of the financial position of each undertaker—a water company—including information on share capital and debt, and any significant changes that may have happened in the past 12 months or expected changes in the 12 months to come. We very much welcome the amendment. We tabled many similar amendments that contained aspects of those proposals, both in Committee and on Report. We are bound to say that they were better amendments—more ambitious and far reaching—but as with much of this Bill, these proposals are a decent start and we do not want to stand in their way.

To clarify, we have proposed a variety of amendments to the Bill up to this point, including calling for Ofwat to be made responsible for the financial stability duty on water companies. We called for the banning of bonuses for water company bosses whose companies were performing poorly, and not just on environmental duties but on financial stability and water quality. On the Floor of the House we pushed to a vote, with the permission of the Chair, a ban on water companies making customers pay for their debt at the point of bankruptcy, and instead for investors, who have taken risks, to pay for them. That was right, and we were disappointed that the Government voted against it and the Conservatives sat on their hands and did not support bill payers. This is an important and live issue. In Westmorland in the north-west of England, 11% of bills paid only service the debt of United Utilities, yet in other parts of the country such as the areas served by Thames Water, that figure is around 35% or potentially even more.

We have called for scrutiny not just of the finances of water companies but of other areas. The Bill has moved things in the right direction, but not radically enough. In Committee, we sought to encourage and persuade Labour and Conservative Front Benchers—without success—that it would be wise to have environmental experts on the boards of water companies.

On the Government's laudable and positive move towards a live database that citizen scientists can scrutinise, we asked that it also be a historical database that is searchable in retrospect. Wonderful organisations in my constituency, which are replicated around the country, such as the Eden Rivers Trust, the South Cumbria Rivers Trust, the Clean River Kent campaign and Save Windermere, would monitor that database, but unless they look at it 24/7 and do nothing else in their lives, some things may get past them. For example, between 2021 and 2023, 120 million litres of sewage were pumped into Windermere lake without United Utilities reporting it. We are reliant on citizen scientists knowing about this stuff, and a great database will do the job only if it is searchable in retrospect. Scrutiny and transparency on finances and environmental matters are vital. We are satisfied that amendment (a) provides increased transparency on water company finances, and therefore we will not make a nuisance of ourselves today.

I turn to the second of the amendments in front of us. The hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson) rightly highlights and reminds Members of my distaste for not having stuff in the Bill, and how statutory instruments are not the best way of doing things. Despite that, I am even more of a fan of ensuring that we in this place can properly scrutinise those who are meant to be scrutinising our water companies, namely Ofwat.

Throughout the passage of the Bill, Liberal Democrats have made good, radical, environmentally minded proposals that are in the interests of our constituents and our waterways. Although the Government have understandably stuck to their guns and voted against us, the official Opposition have, oddly enough, abstained on pretty much everything—including, it would appear, on their own amendment today, for which we want to vote, notwithstanding all our reticence about not having important matters in the Bill.

This amendment was proposed in the other place by my former neighbour but one—not the hon. Member for Epping Forest, who is also my former neighbour—the right hon. Lord Blencathra, a former Member for Penrith and the Border, and a very accomplished parliamentarian. In this amendment, he is seeking to require increased parliamentary scrutiny of Ofwat when signing off on water company bonuses. That issue is of huge concern to me, and, I think, to most people around this country—certainly in my constituency—because record bonuses are being paid to senior executives around the country.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman put forward a veritable smorgasbord of amendments in the Bill Committee, and all those issues were discussed. It is so important that Ofwat retains its independence. It is extremely relevant to point out, however, that during the coalition years and the 14 years the Conservatives were in government, no Bills were passed to ban water company bonuses, and this Bill will do just that.

Tim Farron: The hon. Lady is right. Previous Governments of all parties have not tackled these issues as they should have done—including, of course, the previous Labour Government, under Gordon Brown and Tony Blair. There is no doubt whatsoever, however, that we are now looking at a massively changed situation. Why do the public care so much more about this issue than five or six years ago? It is because—I say this neutrally—we were in the European Union before then, and we had different levels of scrutiny. It is also because this House went through the process of basically lifting the bonnet to see what was already acceptable, at which point people in this place and around the country became utterly outraged at what was permissible. Yes, parties of all sides bear a responsibility, and not least the party that privatised the industry in the first place and let the cat out of the bag.

Ofwat does need to be scrutinised; that is what I find most frustrating. Now that the UK is not in the European Union, our own regulations are not scrutinised from outside—so if we do not do it, who will? We have heard many times of Ofwat's failure to scrutinise properly and hold to account the water companies; we heard on more than one occasion in Committee, as well as in this Chamber, of the £164 million in fines that Ofwat has levied against three water companies, of which, four years on, it has collected precisely zero pounds and zero pence. Our argument throughout this process has been that Ofwat, despite containing many very good and valuable people who are working their hardest, is nevertheless a regulator not fit for purpose. The amendment seeks to force Ofwat to give six months' notice of bonuses it has signed off, rather than the seven days that the Government want, which is inadequate.

Dr Hudson: I am slightly curious as to why, at the eleventh hour, the third party is now changing its position. In the other place, when this amendment was pushed to a vote, the Liberal Democrats abstained on two occasions, but now they are playing political games and actually risking the progress of the Bill. The amendment, as it stated, was to introduce a statutory instrument to increase parliamentary scrutiny and accountability. The Government have moved some way—although not as far as we would like—but the third party is now playing political games, and risks the progress of a Bill that is trying to improve the state of our waters.

Tim Farron: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I can do maths, so I know there is absolutely no threat whatsoever to the progress of this Bill—I know what the numbers will be, roughly, when and if we divide on this matter.

I am not a late convert but an early convert—a convert long before the hon. Gentleman—to the importance of scrutiny. It is therefore important that we make this case: imperfect though this proposal is, it is far better for this House to be given six months' notice of Ofwat's intention to allow bonuses than seven days. That is surely better, and that is why we insist as we do. This is Parliament scrutinising Ofwat because of Ofwat's failure to scrutinise the water companies.

That is our simple point. It is why we have proposed much more radical reform throughout this process, including the abolition of Ofwat altogether. It is not the fault of the people who work for the organisation

specifically. When regulation of the water industry is fragmented across parts of Ofwat and other agencies, which do not have the necessary powers and resources, the water companies will, of course, run rings around the regulators, and it is our constituents and our waterways—our lakes, rivers and coastal areas—that bear the brunt and suffer.

Dr Hudson: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. He talks about a number of fantastic amendments the third party made in Committee, many of which were so poorly worded that they were not actually worth voting on. His particular amendment about abolishing Ofwat actually contained no suggestion as to what the third party would replace it with, or how much it would cost—

Tim Farron: It did.

Dr Hudson: It did not. It did not set out how much it would cost or how long it would take. While we want Ofwat to have the teeth to hold water companies to account, the third party proposes getting rid of it. Again, is it the party of protest that is not offering any credible solutions.

Tim Farron: Well, first of all, if the hon. Gentleman had paid more attention, he would know that we proposed a clean water authority, which would gather up all the powers of Ofwat and the environmental and water regulatory powers of the Environment Agency.

I say this gently, but, again, there is a pattern here. Both in opposition and in government, the Conservative party shows greater levels of fury and anger over Liberal Democrats campaigning to clean up our waterways than over the fact that our waterways are full of poop in the first place.

Dr Hudson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Tim Farron: I have already taken two interventions from the hon. Gentleman, so I will not.

My simple comment is that this Bill will do good, and we are supportive of it. We wish only to trouble the House a short time to ensure greater scrutiny is brought in. We have accepted throughout this process, with some reluctance, the Government's position that this is part 1, and that part 2 is to come, and that the review led by Sir Jon Cunliffe will potentially consider more radical action. We hope that is the case, and we shall engage with things on that basis. I have in my hand some pieces of paper that I propose to send to Jon Cunliffe, which tighten up some of the smorgasbord of amendments, as they have been called.

We care deeply about our waterways. I am honoured to represent the bulk of the English Lake district, with so many lakes and rivers, as well as our coastal areas in Morecambe bay. The quality of our waterways is deeply personal to me and to my communities. We shall continue to campaign unashamedly for something far better for our constituents, and indeed for our water right across the United Kingdom.

Emma Hardy: With the leave of the House, I thank all hon. Members for their thoughtful and valuable contributions to today's debate. Without stepping into the territory of a Second Reading debate, I suggest gently to the House that we are here today debating the

[Emma Hardy]

Water (Special Measures) Bill precisely because of the public outrage caused by previous lack of investment, and the fact that every single river, lake and sea in our country has been polluted. Had the previous Government, as stated by the now official Opposition, done the marvellous, wonderful job that they seem to want to suggest they did, there would not be the need for this Bill in the first place—neither would there be the need for all the campaigns that have taken place up and down the country. However, I will go no further into that.

I have respect for the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson), as he knows. However, I say gently that it is dishonest to suggest that legislation is needed for the water restoration fund, because, in fact, the Conservatives created the fund without legislation. To imply that legislation is required to have the fund would, therefore, be inadvertently dishonest. It was created without legislation, and therefore it does not need legislation to be held.

Dr Hudson: I am slightly concerned that the Minister is raising questions about my honesty. The water restoration fund exists, but where is it now? What has happened to it? Are the Government going to use it again? That is why we wanted to push, at every stage of the Bill, the point that the water restoration fund needs to be used to ringfence money so that fines on water companies can be ploughed back into restoring local waterways. I will be very happy if the Minister says today that the water restoration fund is carrying on, and then my honesty will be intact.

2.30 pm

Emma Hardy: I thank the hon. Gentleman. As I have said throughout, he will have to wait and see, but to imply that legislation is required for the fund would be dishonest. I am sure the hon. Gentleman does not want his honesty to be questioned. The implication that legislation is required for the water restoration fund is simply not true.

As I outlined in my opening speech, I recognise that there remains a strong interest in issues wider than the scope of today's debate. I reiterate that the Bill is not the limit of our ambition. The Government will continue to work with hon. Members across the House to discuss and make progress in addressing the fundamental issues facing our water sector.

The hon. Gentleman mentions the words "time to time". The wording has been specifically designed to allow Ofwat to review requirements as and when appropriate, and adapt quickly where needed. We do not want to pre-empt how often this kind of review might need to take place. To reassure him, that was discussed at length in the other place.

On parliamentary scrutiny, the Government worked with Ofwat to offer peers and MPs an opportunity to raise questions on Ofwat's rules in a parliamentary drop-in session, providing further insight on the rules. However, that proposal was not accepted by hon. Members' colleagues in the other place, which feels like a shame.

It has always been our intention to bring about, through the Bill, meaningful change in the performance and culture of the water sector. The amendments tabled by the Government are in keeping with that objective. I hope the House will support the Government

amendments, which will ensure that the public can easily access an overview of water company financial information, and will give Ofwat a duty to issue rules on financial transparency that will commence on Royal Assent. Together, the amendments will enable the Government to take another positive step forward in restoring public trust in the water sector, which has sadly been destroyed over the past 14 years.

Similarly, I hope the House will support the Government in bringing forward amendments to ensure that Ofwat's rules are brought forward promptly and that its independence is protected. The Government acknowledge the intention behind the changes made in the other place, but we cannot accept the risk that they create in delaying the introduction of Ofwat's rules. I therefore hope that Members across the House will also support the Government in ensuring that these vital rules are brought forward without delay.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I am sure the Minister did not meant to imply that the shadow Minister was in any way dishonest, and she might perhaps seek to correct the record to say she felt that he was mistaken or incorrect.

Emma Hardy: I am very happy to issue that correction.

Question put.

A Division was called.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Division off.

Question agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House insists on Commons Amendment 1 to which the Lords have disagreed, disagrees to Lords Amendment 1B to the words restored to the Bill by the Lords' disagreement to Commons Amendment 1, and proposes amendments (a) and (b) to the Bill in lieu of the words left out by Commons Amendment 1.

Motion made, and Question put,

That this House insists on Commons Amendment 2 to which the Lords have disagreed, and proposes amendment (a) in lieu of the words so left out.—(*Keir Mather.*)

The House divided: Ayes 331, Noes 65.

Division No. 99]

[2.36 pm]

AYES

| | |
|---|------------------------|
| Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>) | Asato, Jess |
| Abbott, Jack | Asser, James |
| Abrahams, Debbie | Athwal, Jas |
| Adam, Shockat | Atkinson, Catherine |
| Ahmed, Dr Zubir | Atkinson, Lewis |
| Akehurst, Luke | Bailey, Olivia |
| Alaba, Mr Bayo | Baines, David |
| Aldridge, Dan | Baker, Richard |
| Al-Hassan, Sadik | Ballinger, Alex |
| Ali, Rushanara | Bance, Antonia |
| Ali, Tahir | Barker, Paula |
| Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena | Barron, Lee |
| Allister, Jim | Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex |
| Amesbury, Mike (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>) | Baxter, Johanna |
| Anderson, Callum | Beales, Danny |
| Antoniazzi, Tonia | Beavers, Lorraine |
| Arthur, Dr Scott | Bell, Torsten |
| | Benn, rh Hilary |
| | Berry, Siân |
| | Betts, Mr Clive |

Billington, Ms Polly
 Bishop, Matt
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carling, Sam
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Chowns, Ellie
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Dean, Josh
 Denyer, Carla
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Duffield, Rosie
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Grady, John
 Hack, Amanda
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 MacAlister, Josh

Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Powell, Joe
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, Emma
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Rutland, Tom
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shannon, Jim
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Swann, Robin
 Tami, rh Mark
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Welsh, Michelle
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael

Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, David
Wilson, rh Sammy
Witherden, Steve

Woodcock, Sean
Yang, Yuan
Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Ayes:
Kate Dearden and
Gerald Jones

NOES

Amos, Gideon
Aqarone, Steff
Babarinde, Josh
Bennett, Alison
Brewer, Alex
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Cane, Charlotte
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chadwick, David
Chambers, Dr Danny
Coghlan, Chris
Cooper, Daisy
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Davey, rh Ed
Davies, Ann
Dean, Bobby
Dillon, Mr Lee
Dyke, Sarah
Farron, Tim
Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
George, Andrew
Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote*
cast by Anna Sabine)
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Green, Sarah
Harding, Monica
Heylings, Pippa
Hobhouse, Wera
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Liz
Jones, Clive
Kohler, Mr Paul
Lake, Ben

MacCleary, James
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Mathew, Brian
Maynard, Charlie
Medi, Llinos
Milne, John
Moran, Layla
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom (*Proxy vote*
cast by Mr Forster)
Munt, Tessa
Olney, Sarah
Perteghella, Manuela
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Smart, Lisa
Sollom, Ian
Stone, Jamie
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Cameron
Voaden, Caroline
Wilkinson, Max
Wilson, Munira
Wrigley, Martin
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
Wendy Chamberlain and
Zöe Franklin

Question accordingly agreed to.

Arbitration Bill [Lords]

Considered in Committee

[CAROLINE NOKES *in the Chair*]

Clause 1

LAW APPLICABLE TO ARBITRATION AGREEMENT

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Caroline Nokes): With this it will be convenient to consider clauses 2 to 18 stand part.

May I remind Members that in Committee, Members should not address the Chair as Deputy Speaker? Please use our names when addressing the Chair. Madam Chair, Chair, Madam Chairman or Mr Chairman are also acceptable.

2.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Nokes.

On account of the Bill's 18 clauses being grouped together, I will speak to them in numerical order. I begin with clause 1, which contains one of the Bill's key reforms: provision for determining the governing law of an arbitration agreement. This is important because different governing laws may give different answers to important questions such as who is party to the agreement and whether the type of dispute is capable of being arbitrated.

Clause 1 will determine the governing law of the arbitration agreement by replacing the common law approach established in *Enka v. Chubb* with a new statutory rule. The law governing the arbitration agreement will be the law expressly chosen by the parties. Otherwise, it will be the law of the seat. By way of simple illustration, if someone arbitrates in London, by default the applicable law would be English law.

Whereas the common law approach is complex and uncertain, the new approach in clause 1 is simple and predictable. It reduces the prospect of satellite litigation to determine governing law, which can be slow and costly. Where the arbitration takes place in London, as is the choice in so many international arbitrations, by default the arbitration will be fully supported by English law.

For the avoidance of doubt, I would like to add that an express choice of law to govern the main contract rather than the arbitration agreement is not enough. Clause 1 will not apply where the agreement is derived from standing offers of arbitration contained in treaties or foreign domestic legislation, as with investor-state arbitration, for example, as these are better underpinned by international law and foreign domestic law respectively.

Clauses 2, 3 and 4 make provision in relation to the arbitral tribunal. Clause 2 requires an arbitrator to disclose circumstances that might reasonably give rise to justifiable doubts as to their impartiality. It will apply prior to the arbitrator's appointment, when they are being approached with a view to appointment. It will be a continuing duty that also applies after their appointment. This codifies the duty of disclosure recognised by the Supreme Court in its decision in *Halliburton v. Chubb* and will enhance trust in arbitration.

Clauses 3 and 4 will reassure arbitrators that they can take the right decisions in their proceedings without fear of reprisal from a disappointed party. Clause 3 provides that an arbitrator will not be liable for the costs of an application to court for their removal unless the arbitrator has acted in bad faith. Clause 4 provides that an arbitrator's resignation does not give rise to any liability unless the resignation is shown by a complainant to be unreasonable.

Clauses 5 and 6 both concern jurisdiction. There are two ways for a party to question the jurisdiction of the arbitral tribunal. One way is to wait until the tribunal has issued a ruling and then challenge that ruling under section 67 of the Arbitration Act 1996, which allows a challenge to an arbitral award on the basis that the tribunal lacked jurisdiction. The other is by invoking section 32 of that Act, which allows the court to decide whether the tribunal has jurisdiction as a preliminary point.

Clause 5 makes clear that if the tribunal has already ruled on its jurisdiction, any challenge must be brought through section 67. Clause 6 provides that where the arbitral tribunal or court rules that the tribunal has no jurisdiction, that tribunal can nevertheless award the costs of the arbitration proceedings up until that point. This will ensure that if a party wrongly starts arbitration, they can still be held responsible for the wasted costs incurred.

Clauses 7, 8 and 9 deal with arbitral proceedings and the powers of the court. Clause 7 will confer an express power on arbitrators to make an award on a summary basis—that is, adopting an expedited procedure—to dispose of an issue where an arbitrating party has no real prospect of succeeding on that issue. This aligns with the summary judgments available in court proceedings and will deliver more efficient arbitrations. This power can be exercised on application by any of the parties. The procedure to be adopted is not prescribed. It will instead be a matter for the arbitrator to decide on a case by case basis after consulting with the arbitrating parties.

Clause 8 concerns emergency arbitrators. Arbitral rules sometimes provide a regime for the appointment of emergency arbitrators on an interim basis. Such arbitrators can make orders on urgent matters, such as the preservation of evidence, pending the constitution of the full arbitral tribunal. Emergency arbitrators were not commonplace when the 1996 Act was drafted, so it is important that we now expressly empower them. Clause 8 will provide that failing to comply with an order made by the emergency arbitrator will have the same consequences as those for a normal arbitrator.

Clause 9 concerns interim court powers exercisable in support of arbitral proceedings. Under section 44 of the 1996 Act, the court can make orders in support of arbitration proceedings on certain matters—for example, the taking of witness evidence, the preservation of evidence, sales of goods and interim injunctions. Clause 9 will amend section 44 to make it clear that such court orders are also available against third parties. For example, the court will be able to make an order preserving assets against a third party such as a bank. This will mirror the position in court proceedings.

Clauses 10, 11 and 12 concern powers of the court in relation to an arbitral award. An arbitral tribunal can issue an award on whether it has jurisdiction, and it can issue an award on the merits of the dispute. Either type of award can be challenged under section 67 of the

Arbitration Act 1996 on the basis that the arbitral tribunal did not have jurisdiction. Clause 10 will equip the courts with the full suite of remedies for section 67 challenges. When the court has a jurisdiction challenge in front of it, it will have two new options: to declare the arbitral award to be of no effect, or to return the matter to the arbitral tribunal for consideration so that a revised award can be made. These remedies already exist for other challenges, for serious irregularities and for appeals on points of law, so this provision fixes something of an inconsistency in the 1996 Act.

Clause 11 also amends section 67 of the 1996 Act. It will confer a power for rules of court to provide that, unless necessary in the interests of justice, there should be no new grounds of objection and no new evidence put before the court unless it was not reasonably possible to put them before the tribunal. The amendments made to section 67 by clause 11 also provide that evidence taken by an arbitral tribunal should not be reheard by the court. This will avoid these challenges from becoming full re-hearings, departing from the precedent set in the case of *Dallah v. Pakistan*. Re-hearings can involve duplication of time and costs, and it can be unfair to allow a party who lost before the tribunal a complete rerun.

Clause 12 amends section 70 of the 1996 Act, which governs how arbitral awards can be challenged before the courts. It will clarify that the 28-day time limit for such a challenge will start running only after any arbitral process of appeal or correction has concluded.

Clause 13 concerns appeals from High Court decisions and corrects a rare drafting error in the 1996 Act. Section 18 of the Senior Courts Act 1981 and section 35 of the Judicature (Northern Ireland) Act 1978 were amended by the 1996 Act. When read at face value, those sections currently suggest that High Court decisions made under the 1996 Act can be appealed to the Court of Appeal only if expressly permitted in the 1996 Act.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): It is clear from what my hon. Friend is saying that the Bill is welcomed by the legal sector. What engagement has he had with the legal sector and relevant stakeholders?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: There has been massive engagement with parties interested in this Bill. The Bill began in the last Parliament, to which I am grateful for the work already done. It began in the Lords, who engaged fully with parties at that stage. The Lords have had to restart the Bill in the new Parliament, so they have had two bites at the cherry, and all the feedback from stakeholders has been very positive. I thank my hon. Friend for drawing that out in this debate.

3 pm

When read at face value, section 18 of the Senior Courts Act 1981 and section 35 of the Judicature (Northern Ireland) Act 1978 currently suggest that High Court decisions made under the 1996 Act can be appealed to the Court of Appeal only if expressly permitted under that Act. However, the House of Lords judgment in *Inco Europe v. First Choice Distribution* deemed this to be an error. In that case, it was established that appeals to the Court of Appeal under the 1996 Act are permitted by default unless there is explicit provision to the contrary in that Act. Clause 13 rectifies the original drafting mistake to reflect the position established in this case law.

I turn now to clauses 14 and 15. The Bill refers to these as “Miscellaneous minor amendments”. Be that as it may, they offer a few important points of clarification and efficiency. Clause 14 amends sections 32 and 45 of the 1996 Act, which allow arbitrating parties to apply for a preliminary court ruling on jurisdiction or a point of law. Under clause 14, such an application will require either the agreement of the parties or the permission of the tribunal. It removes the further requirement to satisfy the court on a list of matters—in other words, it streamlines the process. Clause 15 will repeal sections 85 and 97 of the Arbitration Act 1996. These both relate to domestic arbitration provisions, but neither was ever brought into force.

Clauses 16 to 18 cover the administrative aspects of the Bill. Clause 16 gives the provisions in the Bill the same extent as they have in the Arbitration Act 1996, which means that the Bill extends to England, Wales and Northern Ireland so that all three jurisdictions benefit from a modernised arbitral framework. Civil justice is not devolved in Wales, but it is now a devolved matter in Northern Ireland. The requisite legislative consent motion was agreed by the Northern Ireland Assembly on 9 December 2024. We are grateful to the Northern Ireland Executive’s Department of Justice for its support in this matter. For completeness, I note that Scotland has its own arbitration legislation, namely the Arbitration (Scotland) Act 2010, which is not affected by this Bill.

Clause 17 makes commencement provisions so that the substantive provisions of the Bill, namely clauses 1 to 15, will come into force

“on such day as the Secretary of State may by regulations appoint.”

Finally, clauses 18 establishes the Bill’s title once in force.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I rise to contribute to the Committee stage debate on the Arbitration Bill on behalf of the Opposition. I thank Lord Bellamy, the previous Conservative Minister who originally introduced the Bill in the Lords in the previous Parliament, and I recognise the work of the Law Commission. Much of this Bill is based on the excellent work that the Law Commission did in considering the original legal framework for arbitration.

We fully support this Bill’s objective of modernising and strengthening the UK’s arbitration framework. Arbitration is a vital pillar of our legal system, supporting businesses, individuals and international commerce while reinforcing London’s position as a world-leading hub for dispute resolution. It is important that this legislation is as robust, effective and fair as possible. The Committee stage presents an opportunity to ensure that the Bill delivers on its promise, and we welcome the improvement that it introduces. I do not intend to go through all the Bill’s clauses, but I reassure the House that the necessary scrutiny that one would expect from the Opposition in Committee is taking place. I will just touch on some of the key clauses.

First, clause 1 provides welcome clarity on the governing law of arbitration agreements, particularly in light of the *Enka v. Chubb* case in 2020. Defaulting to the law of the arbitration seat where no choice is specified increases certainty for businesses.

Secondly, clauses 3 and 4 extend arbitrator immunity to protect them from liability unless bad faith is proven. This is an important step to ensure that arbitrators can act independently without undue fear of litigation. We must retain an effective safeguard to challenge an unreasonable resignation, and we welcome the Minister’s reassurance that parties affected by an arbitration resignation are not unfairly disadvantaged.

Thirdly, clauses 5 and 6 streamline the process for jurisdictional challenges. Parties will either need to seek a preliminary ruling from the court under section 32 of the Arbitration Act 1996, or wait to challenge jurisdiction under section 67.

Fourthly, on the procedural innovations covered in clauses 7 to 9, the introduction of summary disposal of claims is an important step towards greater efficiency, though we would welcome reassurances from the Government that they will monitor its use so that we can be sure that it is applied carefully and fairly, and does not have any unintended consequences. We believe that the recognition of emergency arbitrators is a positive step that enhances the availability of urgent relief, aligning the UK with international best practice.

Also of note is the right of appeal in clause 13. As the Minister stated, there was an unusual previous drafting issue that suggested that appeals to the Court of Appeal were permitted only if expressly allowed under the 1996 Act. That was incorrect. Clause 13 corrects the error, ensuring that appeals are permitted unless specifically restricted. This is a vital change to uphold fairness and legal certainty.

I want to acknowledge an important issue that was raised in the other place by Lord Hacking, whose contributions to the discussion on arbitration have been incredibly valuable. I know that other Members have also pressed for greater scrutiny of how confidential arbitration could be misused to conceal corruption. We welcome the Minister’s assurances that arbitral institutions are taking steps to mitigate those risks, and we believe that the Government must remain actively engaged in monitoring and addressing potential abuses, and not rule out taking further action at an appropriate time if it becomes necessary.

Beyond the issue of corruption, other crucial areas were mentioned in the other place; these are important and warrant further Government attention. They include the need for expedited hearings to prevent undue delays in arbitration proceedings, the role of third-party funding, and ensuring transparency and accountability in funding arrangements, as well as the authority to mandate mediation between parties, where appropriate, to encourage resolution outside of arbitration. The Minister’s attention to these issues is essential, so I would welcome confirmation that they will be addressed in due course.

In conclusion, the Arbitration Bill is a necessary and welcome step in ensuring that the UK remains a pre-eminent jurisdiction for arbitration. However, as with any legislation, its success depends on the details. The Opposition remain committed to ensuring that the Bill delivers legal clarity, procedural efficiency and fairness while upholding the integrity of our arbitration framework. I commend this Bill to the Committee and look forward to seeing its rapid progress through the House.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): I rise in support of this Bill, which introduces important measures to modernise our arbitration framework. We Liberal

Democrats welcome the approach that the Government have taken in refining the Bill's provisions to ensure clarity and effectiveness.

Clause 1 is a key part of this new Bill, and we are fond of the changes made following the recommendations from the Special Public Bill Committee in the previous Parliament. For example, the Committee proposed removing two words to prevent undue confusion, and I am pleased that the Government have accepted that recommendation. In addition, the Government have further clarified that investor state arbitration agreements derived from treaties or non-UK legislation will not be subject to the default rule, which is a welcome and sensible step that is necessary to bring greater legal clarity to the process.

I also welcome the five amendments to clause 11, which enable procedural reforms under section 67 of the 1996 Act. These changes respond directly to concerns raised in the last Committee, and strike the right balance between efficiency and fairness in arbitration proceedings.

Further improvements were made in the other place, where the Government tabled amendments to clause 13 to correct drafting issues, which have been mentioned, and to ensure that access to the Court of Appeal aligns with established case law. These amendments received cross-party support and I am pleased to reinforce the Liberal Democrats' support for them today.

This Bill strengthens the UK's arbitration framework by improving clarity, ensuring fairness and refining procedures. We support its passage and urge the House to do the same. We do not expect any problems with that.

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I give my sincere thanks to hon. and right hon. Members on both sides of the House for their contributions today to what has been a succinct and precise debate. We are all agreed that this is an important step forward, and I am particularly grateful to the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan), and the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde), for welcoming the improvements to the Bill and recognising that they have been the work of many people in the Lords and the Commons as well as of contributors from outside, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) reminded us earlier.

The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle raised the important issue of corruption. As I mentioned during the Bill's Second Reading debate, arbitral corruption is not the result of our domestic framework, which provides several effective remedies to quash corrupt practices. We support sector initiatives to enhance anti-corruption practices such as the International Chamber of Commerce's anti-corruption taskforce, and we will push for the adoption of best practices as they are developed.

The hon. Member also raised third party litigation and funding issues. The Government have carefully considered the impact of the UK Supreme Court judgment in *Paccar*, and have decided to wait for the outcome of the Civil Justice Council review before deciding whether to legislate. A comprehensive review of the market will allow us to take a wider range of factors into account. Following the *Paccar* judgment, concerns have been raised about the need for greater regulation of litigation funding agreements and greater safeguards for claimants.

This is therefore an opportune moment to review the status of the market. The review is being undertaken by the Civil Justice Council, supported by a wider consultation group of experts across this area. The final report and recommendations will be published in the summer of 2025, after which the Government will consider the way forward.

The hon. Member also mentioned mandated mediation, and I will try to pick that up as well. The Government agree that dispute resolution, such as mediation, has a key role to play in ending disputes more quickly and cheaply. This is why all parties to a small money claim in the county court are now required to attend a free one-hour mediation appointment with His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service's small claims mediation service as an integrated step in the litigation journey. This reform will help thousands of people and businesses each year to resolve their legal disputes without the need for a court battle. We will continue to work to drive the uptake of dispute resolution throughout the justice system to allow parties to resolve their disputes more consensually and at an earlier stage.

That concludes my responses to the points raised during the Committee of the whole House. I once again thank all those who have contributed to the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 2 to 18 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Third Reading

3.14 pm

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Let me first thank all Members of this House and the other place who have spoken in support of this important Bill and the reforms within it. I am particularly grateful for the support expressed on Second Reading by the hon. Members for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan), and for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover); the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) has added his approval today as well. I am also grateful to all the hon. and right hon. Members who contributed to this afternoon's Committee proceedings. It is encouraging to see enthusiasm on both sides of the House for further improving our already world-leading arbitral framework, and for the business that those changes will generate.

I also thank the many noble Lords who have given this Bill and its predecessor in the last Parliament such thoughtful consideration. Without their input and expertise, the Bill would not be so finely tuned. I pay tribute to the former special Public Bill Committee, which marshalled expert evidence from the sector, the judiciary and the world of academia. That Committee was ably and expertly led by Lord Thomas of Cwmgiedd. I am also grateful to all the other noble and learned Lords who have contributed to the passage of both Arbitration Bills in the other place, particularly Lord Hacking, Lord Wolfson of Tredegar, Lord Verdirame, Lord Beith, Lord Hoffmann, Lord Hope of Craighead and Lord Mance. I wish to give special mention to Lord Bellamy, who first introduced these important reforms to Parliament as a Justice Minister under the previous Government.

[Sir Nicholas Dakin]

Of course, we owe a debt of gratitude to the Law Commission for its exceptional work reviewing the Arbitration Act 1996 and recommending the reforms that are being taken forward in the Bill. Professor Sarah Green and her colleagues at the commission have led what can only be described as a masterclass in public consultation and law reform. I particularly thank Dr Nathan Tamblyn for his work leading the commission's review, and for the support he gave the Ministry of Justice in taking forward this legislation. It is fair to say that no one knows the Arbitration Bill better than Nathan. His contributions to this area of the law will, no doubt, have a long-lasting and positive effect.

This Bill has greatly benefited from the input of experts and practitioners from across the arbitration community. Their contributions were made both through the Law Commission consultations and during evidence-taking by the former Arbitration Bill's special Public Bill Committee. As has been recognised by both Houses, it is vital that our modernised arbitral law works effectively in practice. This has been made possible by the involvement of those who will use this legislation once it comes into force.

Lastly, I put on record my thanks to the officials who have worked on this Bill since it was introduced in the last Parliament. I thank the policy lead, Lee Pedder, the Bill manager, Iona Bonaventura, and Helen Hall from the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel. I also thank my excellent private secretary, Gillian Atkinson.

I conclude by highlighting again the importance of this Bill for the arbitration sector and for UK economic growth more generally. We have a proud history of arbitration on these shores—a point that I covered in some detail on Second Reading. Since the 1996 Act came into force almost 30 years ago, the UK has been the chosen arbitral location for many thousands of disputes from across the world. This House can be confident that the modernisation in the Bill will enable our jurisdiction to continue playing that vital role for many years. This is very much a growth Bill—a growth Bill from a growth Government. I therefore commend the Bill to the House.

3.19 pm

Dr Mullan: I join the Minister in his extensive and accurate list of thanks, and particularly in his thanks to Lord Bellamy, who introduced the original Bill, and to the Law Commission for its excellent work. The Minister also mentioned Lord Thomas, Lord Hacking and Lord Wolfson. I echo his comments on the effective role of the arbitration sector, and on the wealth that it brings to our economy because of its world-leading status and the certainty and confidence that it gives businesses that they will get an excellent service on which they can rely.

Finally, like most Members, I have had conversations with constituents who have said, “Why can’t you lot agree with each other more often? When I turn on the TV, it seems that all you ever do is argue,” but we work together quite effectively on Delegated Legislation Committees and in other forums. This debate is an excellent example of us working collaboratively in the national interest in the main Chamber—an example that Members might point their constituents towards.

3.20 pm

Josh Babarinde: I thank everyone to whom the Minister rightly gave recognition, particularly the behind-the-scenes officials whose work we do not often see, but without whom such landmark legislation would not be possible.

The Liberal Democrats welcome the Arbitration Bill, inasmuch as it represents a significant step forward in modernising and enhancing the arbitration process in the UK. With over 5,000 arbitrations a year in England and Wales, worth about £2.5 billion a year to the economy in fees alone, arbitration has long been a critical alternative to traditional court proceedings, providing a more efficient, cost-effective and flexible way to resolve disputes.

One of the Bill's key merits is its effort to streamline the arbitration process, which can be complex and protracted. By introducing these clearer guidelines and enhancing the powers of arbitrators, the Bill will help us to secure quicker resolutions, reducing delays and backlogs in the justice system. This is crucial for businesses that seek fast and decisive outcomes to disputes.

Of course, arbitration is part of a wider family of alternative dispute resolutions that help to take pressure off our courts. Recognising this, I pay tribute to legal professionals and firms in Eastbourne that work day in, day out, to facilitate many of these alternative dispute resolutions, including Heringtons, Cramp & Mullaney, Hart Reade, Gaby Hardwicke, Stephen Rimmer, SO Legal, Hobson & Latham, Mayo Wynne Baxter, Lawson Lewis Blakers, Cornfield Law, McCarthy Webb—whose services I have used—and many more.

We are pleased to support this Bill for the reasons that I and many other Members have discussed. It will ultimately help to position the UK as an attractive destination for global arbitration, reinforcing its status as a leading centre for business and legal expertise, whether we are talking about the financial capital of the UK or the sunshine capital of the UK, Eastbourne, with its legal expertise, to which I have just alluded.

The Liberal Democrats are pleased to back this Bill, and I am proud to support it.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting—

(a) 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 the Motions in the name of Secretary Jonathan Reynolds relating to Terms and Conditions of Employment not later than two hours after the start of proceedings on the Motion for this Order;

(b) the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motion in the name of Lucy Powell relating to Scrutiny of European Statutory Instruments not later than one hour after the start of proceedings on that Motion; such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by the Speaker which may then be moved;

proceedings on these motions 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.—(*Anna Turley.*)

Terms and Conditions of Employment

3.23 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders):

I beg to move,

That the draft Neonatal Care Leave and Miscellaneous Amendments Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 20 January, be approved.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following motion:

That the draft Statutory Neonatal Care Pay (General) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 20 January, be approved.

Justin Madders: I am delighted to move regulations under the Neonatal Care (Leave and Pay) Act 2023, which originated as a private Member's Bill in the previous Parliament. I therefore pay tribute to Stuart McDonald, the former Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East, and Baroness Wyld for successfully steering the legislation through both Houses, so that it could secure Royal Assent in 2023.

The Act established new statutory entitlements to neonatal care leave and neonatal care pay for employed parents if their child starts to receive neonatal care within 28 days of birth and goes on to spend seven or more continuous days in care. These regulations are another step towards implementing neonatal care leave and pay in April 2025, and they are the first to be brought before the House under the Act.

There is currently no statutory entitlement to such rights for parents of children who require neonatal care. Parents in this difficult situation have had to rely on existing rights, such as maternity leave or annual leave, to be there to care for their baby and to support their partner. This approach has understandably caused additional stress for parents. Some mothers report that they had to leave work because they were not ready to return at the end of their maternity leave. As paternity leave is limited to two weeks, some fathers and partners have had to rely on statutory unpaid parental leave or the compassion of their employers to take time off work.

Around 40,000 babies a year spend more than a week in neonatal care. Once provisions on neonatal care leave and pay come into force in April, we estimate that around 60,000 parents will be eligible, and that around 34,000 parents will take up paid leave each year. Neonatal care leave will enable eligible parents to take a minimum of one week's leave and a maximum of 12 weeks' leave, depending on how long their baby receives neonatal care, on top of their other parental leave entitlements. It will be a day one right for employees.

Statutory neonatal care pay, like other family-related pay rights, will be available to employees who also meet continuity of service and minimum earnings tests. Eligible employees must have worked for their employer for at least 26 weeks, ending with the relevant week, and earn on average at least £125 a week before tax. If eligible, a parent will be able to claim a flat rate of £187.18 a week in 2025-26, or 90% of their average earnings, whichever amount is lower.

Employers will administer the statutory payments on behalf of the Government. Small employers will be able to recover 103% of the statutory payment from the Exchequer, while larger employers can recover 92% of payments and will therefore incur wage-like costs equivalent to 8% of the statutory payments they make. This is a similar arrangement to that in place for other parental payments.

Together, these regulations will provide protection and support for parents at an incredibly challenging time. These entitlements provide a floor, and employers can and should go further if they are able.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree that these changes will not only support parents who are going through a really difficult time but will also be good for employers? By showing that they are supporting their employees to return to work with these additional rights, this will be good for employers in the long term, too.

Justin Madders: My hon. Friend is right. The impact assessment refers to evidence showing that family-friendly policies are good for employers as well as for individuals. That is certainly the Government's approach towards employment rights.

We have extensively consulted stakeholders, including charities and business representative organisations, to ensure that these regulations balance the needs of parents and businesses. These groups agree that the proposed reforms will provide substantial benefits to businesses, including the retention of their employees' skills and knowledge, as my hon. Friend has just said. I will explain in detail a few points in the regulations, which have been developed through consultation with relevant Departments, including the Department of Health and Social Care.

We have a definition of neonatal care that encapsulates the different ways in which babies receive it, including beyond the walls of a hospital and through outreach care. This could include care that takes place in the family home, provided it meets the relevant criteria. We have included outreach care in the eligibility criteria to capture the many ways in which babies receive care, and to prevent a postcode lottery in which parents of children who receive the same clinical treatment may qualify in one area because they receive their treatment in hospital, but not in another area because they receive their treatment at home through an outreach care programme.

To ensure that as many parents as possible are eligible, the definition of "parent" in the regulations encompasses adoptive parents, foster-to-adopt parents and intended parents in surrogacy arrangements. Those who meet this definition will also be required to have caring responsibility for the child.

Having a baby in neonatal care is a difficult experience for any parent, whether the baby is admitted for one day or for many months. However, this entitlement will focus on parents of babies who experience prolonged stays in neonatal care as they will be in most need of additional support. A qualifying period of neonatal care will therefore be a minimum of seven continuous days, beginning on the day after the one on which the care starts. Starting the clock at one minute past midnight of the day after the child is admitted creates a consistent approach that does not vary from baby to baby.

[Justin Madders]

The total amount of statutory neonatal care leave and pay available to parents will be capped at a maximum of 12 weeks, which balances the needs of businesses with the needs of parents. It is also worth noting that the entitlement will be in addition to other entitlements to parental leave and pay that parents may also be eligible for.

The leave and pay can be taken in two tiers. Tier 1 leave can be taken when the baby is receiving neonatal care and for one week after they stop receiving care. That leave can be taken at short notice, allowing parents to act flexibly in an emergency. Tier 2 leave can be taken after the baby has left neonatal care and therefore requires more prescription to ensure the needs of employers are balanced against the needs of employees. That approach provides flexibility for parents and crucially allows them to work around existing leave entitlements, such as maternity or paternity leave.

Employees will need to give notice to take leave and pay, and provide their employer with the information set out in the regulations. The method depends on which tier of leave they take and, as Members will expect, the stipulations in tier 1 are less stringent than those in tier 2. When the employee wants to take leave in tier 1, they will need to notify their employer before they start work on the first day of absence or as soon as possible thereafter. For pay, notice must be given within 28 days, beginning with the first day of the week in which pay is being claimed. When the employee wants to take leave in tier 2, they will need to give notice 15 days in advance for one week of leave and 28 days in advance for two or more weeks of leave. That is because leave in tier 2 can be more easily planned. The same notice requirements will also apply for pay. Furthermore, parents are not required to provide proof of their child receiving neonatal care. To make a claim in respect of pay, the employee may need to provide a signed self-declaration.

Parents who are out of the workforce on family leave for extended periods may be at more risk from redundancy when they first return to work. We have therefore ensured that parents on neonatal care leave will be protected from redundancy, and those who have taken six continuous weeks of neonatal care leave will also be protected until their child turns 18 months.

We anticipate that there will be some impact on businesses regarding familiarisation with the policy and managing the impact of employee absences. Like other family-related pay entitlements, employers will be responsible for administering the statutory payment on behalf of the Government. Overall, we estimate that the net annual recurring cost to businesses will be around £22.5 million. We also anticipate there will be a one-off familiarisation cost to businesses, which we estimate to be £4.7 million.

Despite those costs, we anticipate that there will be further benefits to businesses, as there is evidence that shows, as has already been mentioned, that workplaces offering a range of extensive family-related policies are more likely to have above-average performance relative to workplaces without such practices. My officials are working with His Majesty's Revenue and Customs to ensure there is clear guidance on gov.uk to support employers in implementing this policy, and with Bliss,

to which I pay tribute for its work in this area, to ensure that parents can access the information they need to understand their entitlement as easily as possible.

I thank all those who have been involved in the development of neonatal care leave, including the premature and sick babies charities, for their tireless campaigns and support. I hope they are proud that we have got this on the statute book and that the regulation will be introduced today. It will make a real difference to hard-working families, who need the support at such a critical time. I commend the regulations to the House.

3.23 pm

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to contribute on behalf of His Majesty's loyal Opposition, and I welcome the introduction of these two statutory instruments, which have been a long time coming. In 2019, the Conservatives made a manifesto commitment to introduce neonatal care leave. It was a shame that in that election, and in the most recent, no such commitment was made by the Labour party, now in government. That is no surprise, however; just like with all their good ideas, it usually turns out that they were ours.

Our commitment to introducing neonatal care leave led to our support of the Neonatal Care (Leave and Pay) Act 2023, which was stewarded by the former Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East, Stuart C McDonald and Baroness Wyld. That Act is the reason why the Government are introducing these statutory instruments today.

I am pleased that, with reservations, we will support the measures, so that we can continue to build on the sensible improvements to workers' rights that we, as Conservatives, introduced in government. We introduced shared parental leave, giving more choice and flexibility to families, and carers leave, giving employees more time off to give or arrange care for their families. We supported flexible working, giving employers and employees more flexibility over working practices, and we achieved all that while increasing employment and wages, a thing that the Government are now realising is no easy feat.

The result of our reforms to workers' rights is that Britain has some of the most generous maternity and paternity leave globally, meaning families are able to spend more time with their newborns. Those achievements were reached by working with businesses and employees. We worked with businesses not just out of courtesy, but because we know that without consulting businesses and taking on board their concerns, no progress will be made, no matter how good the intention. That is not something this Government have done, which is why their Employment Rights Bill is driving up unemployment before it has even been passed.

In the plan to make work pay, the Government committed to rights from an employee's first day, but for neonatal care pay, that is not the case. Will the Minister confirm whether this is the first step in rolling back on day one rights? Under the Neonatal Care (Leave and Pay) Act 2023, the right to neonatal care leave and pay will come into force in less than two months. Why have the Government waited to introduce the instruments until now, leaving businesses less than eight weeks to prepare and plan? We have heard that the Prime Minister has requested a growth test on all policies. Has the Minister conducted a growth test on this policy? If not, why not?

More generally, this Government's record on health, in particular women's health, has been disappointing. At the end of last month, the Health Secretary dropped women's health targets and those for women's health hubs. That decision will impact 600,000 women on waiting lists, lead to preventable disease progression and lead to more women attending A&E, unable to work, care or live a fulfilled life. The Labour manifesto made a commitment to prioritise women's health, but this Government are making a habit of taking with one hand to give with the other. Will the Minister confirm whether he raised his concerns over the cancellation of health targets, which have an impact on these measures, with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care?

Chris Vince: The shadow Minister talks about targets, but was it not his own Government that got rid of the targets for A&E waiting times, and then failed to meet their lowered targets?

Greg Smith: It is a brave Labour politician who talks about health targets when, for so long, the NHS in Wales was performing, and continues to perform, worse than in England when it was run by the Conservatives.

To conclude, we will support these statutory instruments because they will support the 40,000 families who faced the incredibly difficult and worrisome experience of having a child in neonatal care. The instruments will build on our achievements that made the UK one of the best places in the world to be the parents of a newborn, and I hope the Government can continue to make progress.

I end by again thanking the former Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East and Baroness Wyld. I also thank Bliss and the Smallest Things for their consistent work that has kept neonatal care pay and leave at the top of all of our agendas.

3.39 pm

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): I commend the Minister for bringing the statutory instruments before the House. They introduce much-needed and long-overdue support for new families, which I am sure will be welcomed by Members across the House.

As every parent will know, the time after childbirth is a time like no other. It is both incredibly special and incomparably difficult, with lasting effects on the wellbeing of parents, carers and their babies. I pay tribute to my constituent Ashley Wiseman. In 2018, she gave birth prematurely to twins at 24 weeks. Her first child Esme was sadly born sleeping. Her second child Isla was born 50 minutes later. Isla was admitted to neonatal care at Basildon hospital before being transferred to the Royal London hospital.

Ashley met me and told me about the fear and uncertainty that she felt at that time, the impossible choice that her family faced between returning to work or being beside their sick child, and the financial burden of travelling to visit Isla once she moved to the Royal London hospital. Ashley described what we would all find impossible to imagine: long stays on the ward, some of her darkest days, and Isla being given just a 2% chance of survival. After seven months in a neonatal intensive care unit, Isla was discharged, and last month she celebrated her seventh birthday.

Out of such a traumatic and stressful time, Ashley created Isla's Journey, a charity offering support to families of babies in neonatal wards. The charity provides care packs for new parents at over 80 NICU wards across the UK. That simple support makes a huge difference to families by allowing parents to spend as much time as possible beside their baby, and the changes brought forward today will achieve the same thing. By providing a statutory right to paid leave for working families with babies in neonatal care, the regulations will remove the unimaginable and impossible choice for new parents of either returning to work to pay their bills or staying beside their desperately ill child.

It is difficult enough to have a child in the neonatal intensive care unit. Parents being with their new baby in the early days is vital for their mental and emotional wellbeing, as well as for the early life chances of the baby. The benefits of things like skin-to-skin contact and those early bonding experiences cannot be overstated, and that sometimes feels like an impossible task for parents whose baby is in the NICU. This legislative change removes one of those barriers to these early experiences being a joyful time for parents whose babies have an extra way to go when they are first born.

As Ashley and other parents can attest, there is still more to be done. For example, Isla's Journey advocates for a travel support fund for parents, because when a child is admitted to a neonatal ward miles from home, parents have to make long and costly journeys to spend time with their baby. While the new regulations will take away the compounding financial burden of a loss of income, the travel still comes at a significant cost. Unless they are an in-patient, mothers and other parents are not provided with basic amenities, such as a meal, on the ward. When Isla was transferred to the Royal London hospital, Ashley said that it became near impossible to give her body the correct nutrition she needed to breastfeed. When her child's life was so fragile, she often did not want to leave her side for a moment, even to find something to eat. Other parents have chosen not to eat to pay for their travel to the hospital.

While I welcome the measures the Government are taking in the statutory instruments to remove worries around leave and pay for parents at an unimaginably difficult time, I ask that the Minister takes away those suggestions for how the Government can go further and perhaps meet me and the team at Isla's Journey to discuss measures that can make parents' lives that little bit easier. Making those changes would improve the wellbeing of families with babies in the NICU and the life chances of those babies so that parents could focus on what truly matters most to them: the care of their child.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Before I call the Liberal Democrat spokesman, I remind the House that it is courteous for Members who wish to speak to be present for all the opening speeches.

3.44 pm

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): Please accept my sincere apologies for being late, Madam Deputy Speaker. Things moved on at pace this afternoon. I will take what you said seriously into account.

The Liberal Democrats had such proposals in our manifesto, so we welcome the regulations. Some 34,000 people—equivalent to the population of Yate—are

[Steve Darling]

set to benefit from the regulations in the first year after they come into force. I note that the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith), said that the Conservatives promised to deliver such proposals, but—a bit like their hospitals programme—they failed to do so. One needs to bear that in mind.

I pay tribute to Stuart McDonald, a former MP whose private Member's Bill—the Neonatal Care (Leave and Pay) Bill—addressed this issue. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), for sponsoring that Bill, which gave these proposals legs in the Chamber. I am delighted that they are coming to fruition today.

In my Torbay constituency, developing an attachment between parents and children is often a challenge, particularly for those who face serious difficulties in their lives. Many prematurely born youngsters are from more deprived backgrounds—there is twice the chance of that. We Liberal Democrats truly welcome the proposals, because they will drive strong attachment between parents and their babies, and that can only bear fruit for communities across the United Kingdom.

3.46 pm

Liz Jarvis (Eastleigh) (LD): I pay tribute to all parents who have campaigned for change, and I commend the Smallest Things charity for its work on this issue. Co-founders Catriona and Sarah have put their heart and soul into the campaign, laying bare their own experiences to shine a light on the realities of neonatal intensive care and trauma faced by families.

These statutory instruments are a welcome and necessary step in ensuring that parents who find themselves in one of the most distressing and uncertain experiences of their lives have the right to neonatal leave and pay. Under the current system, parents have been left to rely on maternity, paternity or shared parental leave to care for their child in hospital. Neonatal care can often bring additional, unforeseen expenses, including travel costs. For many parents, statutory maternity or paternity pay simply does not stretch far enough.

Although the legislation is a step forward, we must recognise that more can be done. There is a wider picture of maternity and neonatal services that are under growing strain. The NHS workforce is overstretched, and maternity services have been repeatedly flagged as needing urgent attention. We need more midwives, more neonatal nurses and more support for families experiencing traumatic births and baby loss. Will the Minister outline what discussions he has had with colleagues to ensure that maternity and neonatal care services are properly resourced and funded?

Additionally, we must recognise that support for parents should not cease once they leave hospital. The impact of neonatal care does not go away when a baby is discharged, as many children and parents will have long-term health complications. According to Smallest Things, the incidence of mental health difficulties such as post-traumatic stress disorder are thought to be as high as 70%. We should have expanded access to NHS mental health support for all parents who experience a neonatal stay, rather than requiring them to wait until they are at breaking point.

The Government must do much more, alongside the welcome introduction of paid neonatal leave, to tackle and end the unacceptable maternal and neonatal health disparities. This legislation is long overdue, but there is still lots more to do to support families after neonatal care. The Liberal Democrats committed to the introduction of paid neonatal leave in our manifesto. I hope that the Government will continue down that route and consider what more they can do to improve maternity services, including with a national maternity safety ambition beyond 2025, with clear baselines to measure progress. We need real investment in the NHS workforce to ensure that every baby and every parent gets the care they deserve.

No parent should be sitting by their baby's cot worrying about pay or work. It is the Government's duty to provide families with the stability, care and support they need during such a critical and challenging time.

3.49 pm

Justin Madders: I thank all Members for participating in today's debate—there have been some very thoughtful and moving contributions. I will start with my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft), who spoke movingly about Isla and her experiences in neonatal care. It was truly wonderful to hear that, having been given a 2% chance of survival, she recently celebrated her seventh birthday. That is a testament to the great work that many neonatal units do up and down the country, nurturing that very precious life and allowing it to flourish and grow. Of course, I would be happy to meet those from Isla's Journey, but I will talk to my colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care first about whether it might be more appropriate for them to conduct that meeting.

I welcome the support from the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Torbay (Steve Darling). He spoke about the importance of parental attachment, something that we are beginning to understand is vital to a child's development—the more we can do in that area, the better. I also understand the point that the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Liz Jarvis) made, and I recently visited the Countess of Chester, which is building a new children and mother unit. That is absolutely fantastic to see, and clearly, we want to build on investment in this area over coming years.

I felt that the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith) was a little churlish in his support for these regulations. I do not understand the criticism on the basis that these measures were in the Conservatives' 2019 manifesto, since they did not actually implement them. Given that their Government undertook a consultation six years ago, criticising us for bringing these regulations forward within six months seems a little rich.

Of course, the shadow Minister is already blaming the Employment Rights Bill before it is passed for any rise in unemployment. It is completely nonsensical to argue that legislation that is unlikely to be enacted until next year could be responsible for job losses now. It is the kind of talk that we heard when the minimum wage was introduced—it was wrong then, and it is wrong now. To address the shadow Minister's point about why this day one right is not in line with pay, that is consistent with all other parental leave entitlements. Pay comes in

after 26 weeks, because a baseline of information about a person's pay is needed in order to implement such a right.

In conclusion, it is welcome to see support for these measures across the House. The first few weeks after a baby is born are precious, and for a child in neonatal care, that time is even more important. As we have heard, the lack of options for parents who find themselves in that truly challenging situation serves only to worsen what, for many parents, is the most traumatic period of their lives. We hope that giving parents the additional rights and flexibility they need through these regulations will provide some much-needed support, reassurance and stability. Parents dealing with a very ill newborn should not have to worry about whether they can get the time off work that they need, or indeed whether they will have a job to go back to at all. As a nation, we can all understand that, and of course the best employers do these things already. However, by legislating, we send a clear message that all parents in that situation—according to some estimates, there could be up to 60,000—will be able to put all their focus on their child, which is as it should be.

On that note, I commend these regulations to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT

Resolved,

That the draft Statutory Neonatal Care Pay (General) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 20 January, be approved.—(*Justin Madders.*)

Scrutiny of European Statutory Instruments

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That the following Standing Order shall be made:

1. For the purposes of paragraph 17 of Schedule 7 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 and paragraph 6 of Schedule 5 to the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Act 2023 the committee charged with considering draft instruments and related documents shall be the committee appointed under Standing Order No. 152 to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Department laying the draft instrument or, in respect of an instrument or document laid by a Minister in the Cabinet Office, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee.

2. A committee considering such a draft instrument or related document shall have the assistance of the Counsel to the Speaker.

3. In its consideration of an instrument referred to in paragraph (1) the committee shall consider, in addition to such other matters as it deems appropriate, whether the draft instrument—

- (a) contains any provision of the type specified in paragraph 1(2) of Schedule 7 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 in relation to which the Act requires that a draft of the instrument must be laid before, and approved by a resolution of, each House of Parliament (the affirmative procedure);
- (b) contains any provision of the type specified in paragraph 5(2) of Schedule 5 to the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Act 2023 in relation to which the Act requires that a draft of the instrument must be laid before, and approved by a resolution of, each House of Parliament (the affirmative procedure);
- (c) otherwise appears to make an inappropriate use of the negative procedure;

and shall report to the House if it is of the opinion that the negative procedure should not apply.

4. This Standing Order shall lapse—

- (a) in so far as it relates to documents laid in accordance with paragraph 17(3)(b) of Schedule 7 to the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 (and matters arising from the consideration of such documents), at the end of the period after which no more regulations may be made under section 23(1) of that Act;
- (b) in so far as it relates to documents laid in accordance with paragraph 6(3)(b) of Schedule 5 to the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Act 2023 (and matters arising from the consideration of such documents), at the end of the period after which no more regulations may be made under Sections 11, 12, or 14 of that Act.—(*Lucy Powell.*)

3.54 pm

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Scrutiny of the laws that we make and that bind us is very important, and it is exceedingly important when the origins of the laws are not within our own parliamentary framework. Of course, in the part of the United Kingdom from which I come, Northern Ireland, in over 300 areas the laws are made not by this House or the Stormont Assembly, but by a foreign Parliament that we do not elect—the European Parliament. That underscores the huge importance of effective scrutiny.

In so far as this motion slightly improves the situation, it is welcome, but I need to make three or four points. Is the inference of this motion that there has been no scrutiny of these matters since the demise of the European Scrutiny Committee in or about April of last year? If so, a vast swathe of laws have obviously gone unscrutinised.

[Jim Allister]

The former Chairman of the European Scrutiny Committee told this House in March 2023 that, in the two years from 2021 to 2023, 640 EU laws had been imposed on Northern Ireland. How many have been imposed since, and how many of them have been scrutinised?

Since Northern Ireland is the region most affected by many of these laws, I have to register my disappointment that not a single Member from Northern Ireland was proposed for the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. That is a huge failure to give those I represent some confidence that scrutiny is taking place and is effective.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Does the hon. and learned Gentleman agree with me, as someone who sat on the European Scrutiny Committee in the last Parliament, that it is no surprise that the Labour Government do not want to scrutinise this legislation coming from the European Union, because for much of the last Parliament, with the exception of the former Member for Dagenham and Rainham, Jon Cruddas, the Labour Members on the then European Scrutiny Committee never turned up?

Jim Allister: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says and I do not gainsay it. If that is so, it is a very poor reflection on the interest in scrutiny.

Not only do we have this lacuna in scrutiny of a year or more; we have the very unsatisfactory position of there being no transparency—there is no public list of all the imposed EU laws. It does not exist, from what I am told. How can it be right for citizens in any part of this United Kingdom to be governed by laws when there is not even a list of all those laws? I look to the Government for a commitment that there will at least be the transparency of publishing a list of all relevant regulations that are imposed—and “imposed” is the correct word—on Northern Ireland from a foreign Parliament.

Some may say, “Oh, but doesn’t the Stormont Assembly have a Democratic Scrutiny Committee?”, and, of sorts, it does, but on 2 February the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland wrote to the Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly informing him of the types of laws that will be reported to the Assembly, and it does not include all laws. We have the so-called Stormont brake, which applies only to any law amending an existing EU law. We have applicability motions, which can apply to any new law, but we do not have any right of scrutiny within the Northern Ireland Assembly of what we would call statutory instruments. There simply is no capacity to scrutinise them.

We recently had a troubling example of such a statutory instrument. Commission implementing regulation 2025/89 creates a situation where, for the first time in any part of this United Kingdom, and with no consultation with our consumers or our elected representatives, we now have an authorised EU law whereby mealworms and insects can be included in food products. That EU law has been imposed upon Northern Ireland without any scrutiny in Stormont or in this place. Would that type of EU implementing regulation be on the agenda of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, or would it just pass under the radar, as has been happening for so long?

Vast swathes of important law are not classified as devolved under the protocol arrangements, so they are never scrutinised in the Northern Ireland Assembly, nor can they ever be scrutinised. Nothing that arises under the EU’s customs code, under its VAT regime or under state aid is devolved. Those matters are reserved to this place. Regulations are made from time to time on the customs code, which is the most offensive of all the protocol arrangements, because it is the one that says, “Northern Ireland is to be treated as EU territory. GB is to be treated as a third or foreign country, and thus the goods coming from GB to Northern Ireland—coming from a third country—have to be subject to the rigours of an international customs border.” All that arises under the EU’s customs code, and none of that can be scrutinised in Northern Ireland. None of it has been scrutinised in this House, either.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On the lack of scrutiny, does the hon. and learned Member agree that as time goes on and the American Administration begin to look at what they may or may not do vis-à-vis trading arrangements with the EU, it is all the more important—it was important anyway—that we have close scrutiny, because of the deals that may come about between the American Administration, the UK and possibly the EU?

Jim Allister: Yes, and there is much talk about tariffs. Think of the conundrum that would be created if President Trump imposed tariffs on the EU. Northern Ireland, treated as EU territory, would, I presume, be subject to those tariffs, yet we are told that we are part of the United Kingdom. That is all because of the application to Northern Ireland of the customs code. If there were corresponding responses from the EU in that scenario, those would, under adjustments to matters arising under its customs code, apply to Northern Ireland it seems, and all without scrutiny.

While the establishment of this Committee, belated as it is, is welcome, it is important that we are able to understand that it will seriously address the scrutiny issues, as the previous Committee under Sir Bill Cash did. I pay tribute to him for the work that he did, but there has been this great gap in the meantime with effectively no scrutiny whatever. Now that scrutiny will be done by a Committee without, as I have said, a Northern Ireland representative even on it.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the hon. and learned Member accept that even when we had the European Scrutiny Committee, which was able to deal exclusively with such issues, there were many EU regulations that it did not have the opportunity to discuss? Given the importance of such regulations not just to Northern Ireland but, as he pointed out, to the whole of the United Kingdom, does he agree that this leaves us vulnerable to detrimental changes in law that will not get enough examination in the House?

Jim Allister: Absolutely. There is a sheer volume of EU law that still applies in Northern Ireland. In annex 2 to the protocol, there are 287 such areas of law, and many have been added to it since. That breeds further regulation of a huge quantity, yet there is a lack of scrutiny.

The speed with which regulation is applied and the lack of opportunity for scrutiny is important. One of the complaints I hear from the Democratic Scrutiny Committee in the Northern Ireland Assembly is that it is not given the time or notice to deal with issues, even if there were the inclination among some to do so.

Sammy Wilson: It is even worse than that. On occasions, regulations have gone through and been adopted before the Committee knew they were there.

Jim Allister: Yes. The Cabinet Office undertakes to notify on a weekly basis, but I think that is honoured more in default than anything else.

From a scrutiny point of view, we are in a perilous position. I do hope that the Committee will grasp the issue and take it seriously. My only regret is there is not a Member from Northern Ireland on the Committee to hold feet to the fire. That goes to the heart of what should affect and concern us all as representatives.

I ask Members of the House who come from other parts of the United Kingdom how they would feel if there were 300 areas of law that they could not make or change and regulations—with votes on them—were not even being properly scrutinised. I think we know how others would feel. Frankly, we ask for nothing that others do not have for themselves.

4.7 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): I thank the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) for that contribution, which I am sure the House has heard. May I first explain to hon. Members that the motion on the Order Paper is not anything to do with European Scrutiny Committee? We dealt with that previously. The motion is about the European Statutory Instruments Committee, a specific Committee whose role was to consider whether certain proposed negative instruments in relation to the UK's withdrawal from the EU should instead follow the affirmative procedure. In the Committee's absence, all measures have proceeded through the affirmative procedure instead.

The hon. and learned Gentleman asked about the numbers, which, in fact, are quite low. I think that previously the Committee looked at about 50 instruments per parliamentary Session, but by the year of the final Session of the last Parliament it was down to just 11, and it has been lower since then as well. We are talking about a tiny number of instruments being considered for the affirmative procedure.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP) *rose*—

Lucy Powell: I will give way if the intervention is on that point.

Robin Swann: In regard to that, as the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) asked, if there is such a low number of instruments and the Committee is not to meet so regularly, why not give Northern Ireland a place on it?

Lucy Powell: The proposal is that the Committee will not meet and that measures will be considered by the relevant Select Committee. So, were measures to relate to Northern Ireland, they would be considered by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. That is what the motion relates to, and not the European Scrutiny Committee, which a number of hon. Members mentioned.

The European Statutory Instruments Committee did specific work, and we now feel that it would not be value for money for the House to pay for a Chair and to facilitate a Committee that would need to meet only on rare occasions to consider whether a statutory instrument should go through the affirmative route. As I said, in the absence of the Committee, all such instruments have gone through the affirmative route, and in future they will be considered by the relevant Select Committee of this House, which I am sure in many instances will be the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

I hope that that reassures Members. I take these matters extremely seriously. It is very important that this House scrutinises measures, whether statutory instruments generated by the Government, other legislation or the rolling on of measures from the European Union or elsewhere. I am happy to keep under consideration how best we can consider these matters should the context change. If Members in the Chamber today have other ideas, they can let me know and I will happily consider them.

Question put and agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

CONSUMER PROTECTION

That the draft Digital Markets, Competition and Consumers Act 2024 (Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 18 December 2024, be approved.—(*Anna Turley.*)

Question agreed to.

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

NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE

That the draft Health and Social Care Act 2008 (Regulated Activities) (Amendment) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 6 January, be approved.—(*Anna Turley.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Potential Closure of the Gidea Park Library

4.11 pm

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): I present a petition on behalf of my constituents, who are devastated by the decision of the local council, the London borough of Havering, to close the Gidea Park library based in the Squirrels Heath ward, which serves a large part of Romford and is used by local children, students and older people. It is a community hub and a cherished local facility, which I campaigned to save in 2001, the year I became a Member of Parliament. Sadly, it is now under threat of closure again by the local council, as proposed by the Labour and Havering Residents Association administration that was in office last year, and opposed by the Conservatives.

Local people and Councillors Christine Vickery, Keith Prince and Michael White, led by me, have collected hundreds if not thousands of signatures across the area, to try to persuade Havering council to change its decision and keep our cherished local library open for local people to use and enjoy.

[Andrew Rosindell]

The petition, on behalf of the people of Gidea Park, the wider community of Romford and the London Borough of Havering, in the historic county of Essex, states:

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Notes that the Gidea Park library provides essential services to local communities; declares that their closure would have an adverse impact upon the local people, specifically the young and elderly; further declares that this library ought not to be closed by the London Borough of Havering; and further declares that community libraries should be protected and enhanced as vital centres of culture, learning, and local service provision by national and local government.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that the Gidea Park library in the parliamentary constituency of Romford is not closed, but rather protected and enhanced as a centre of culture, learning, and local service provision for the people of Gidea Park.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P003042]

US Global Public Health Policy

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

4.14 pm

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): I appreciate the opportunity to speak on a matter of urgent importance: the shifting landscape of global health policy, and the direct threat that shift poses to public health security in the UK and worldwide. In recent weeks, the United States has announced its withdrawal from the World Health Organisation, and is significantly scaling back its support for major global health initiatives. It has also curtailed the activities of key institutions such as the National Institutes of Health and the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, while pausing vital lifesaving programmes run by the US Agency for International Development.

These decisions sent shockwaves across the world. For decades, the US has played a crucial role in some of the greatest health achievements in history: eradicating smallpox and nearly eliminating polio; tackling childhood malnutrition; tackling some of the biggest killers in the form of HIV, tuberculosis and malaria; and responding rapidly to emerging diseases with pandemic potential. Now, with this one decision, it has undermined global health security, weakened its own defences and placed millions of lives at risk.

The UK and our Commonwealth partners have long benefited from strong global health systems. When the world is healthier and more stable, we are, too. However, as a recent study in public health challenges warned, the breakdown of global collaboration is as great a threat as any infectious disease, and the US retreat forces us to confront that head-on.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. I cannot imagine that any Member on either side of this Chamber will not be concerned about the prospect that we face, but we have to live with the reality. Given the withdrawal of the US from the World Health Organisation, it is essential that lines of communication on global health issues remain open and consistent. Does he agree that we must be proactive in establishing a new method of co-operation and information sharing as a matter of urgency? I think that is what he is looking for. If we can meet somewhere in between, that might be the way forward.

Dr Chambers: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He makes a hugely important point.

Economic pressures demand efficiency, but let there be no doubt: withdrawing support from the World Health Organisation is a false and dangerous economy. By stepping away instead of seeking reforms from within, the US has thrown global health security into turmoil. This is about not just principles, but consequences. A withdrawal on this scale damages health diplomacy and erodes trust. It allows adversarial states to step in and use disinformation and strategic influence to reshape the global health landscape to their advantage. If the World Health Organisation is weakened, its ability to track, contain and fight disease is also weakened, and that makes us all more vulnerable. Other nations are already considering following suit; Argentina is voicing

similar intentions. If more countries withdraw, we risk a domino effect that could collapse the framework we rely on to monitor and respond to health threats.

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Does he agree that one lesson from the pandemic is that the last thing countries should do is withdraw from organisations such as the World Health Organisation and reduce international co-operation, given the risk of a future pandemic at some point?

Dr Chambers: I could not agree more. My hon. Friend is completely right. The World Health Organisation is at the heart of international disease surveillance, co-ordinating early responses to outbreaks of deadly diseases such as Ebola and highly pathogenic avian influenza, both of which have been in the news in the last couple of weeks. In today's interconnected world, speed is everything. Without robust early warning systems, outbreaks that might have been contained could spiral into pandemics, just as my hon. Friend said.

We also cannot ignore the worsening impact of climate change on global health. Due to changing temperatures, diseases that were classed as tropical when I was at university are now being seen in other parts of the world. The US withdrawal from the Paris agreement has already slowed efforts to tackle climate-driven diseases; now, its retreat from global health co-operation leaves us even less well prepared to handle the consequences. The UK must remain firm in supporting the WHO's role in pandemic preparedness, not only because it is morally right, but because it is in our national interest.

This crisis affects more than just emergency outbreaks; it threatens our ability to manage persistent health threats here at home. Take seasonal flu. Every winter, the NHS faces immense pressure from influenza. Our ability to develop effective vaccines depends on international collaboration, including data from US research centres. If those partnerships are disrupted, how will we prepare for the 2025 flu season? The same applies to broader scientific research. The UK and US have worked closely on the One Health Initiative, studying how animal, human and environmental health intersect. Hundreds of these projects have now stalled, cutting off vital knowledge that could have helped us understand future pandemics. We must explore ways to sustain these collaborations. That includes securing funding for key research programmes and ensuring that our world-class universities remain engaged in global health security efforts. If we do not do those things, we risk falling behind in disease surveillance, vaccine development and pandemic preparedness.

I have spoken in this House before about the urgent threat of antibiotic-resistant infections to the NHS. Alongside the UK, the US has been a strong supporter of WHO-led efforts to tackle antimicrobial resistance, which experts warn is one of the greatest global health challenges of our time. Antibiotic resistance does not respect borders. Drug-resistant bacteria and fungi travel with people and goods across the world. Without global surveillance, the consequences will be dire. More people will die in NHS hospitals from infections that we can no longer treat. This is not a distant problem; it is happening now. The UK has been helping Ukraine tackle antimicrobial resistance worsened by war. Despite severe funding challenges, collaborations between Chelsea and Westminster

hospital, Great Ormond Street hospital, University College London and Ukrainian institutions have made progress. This proves that even in difficult circumstances, proactive partnerships can make a difference. We must apply these lessons to protect our own health security. I pay tribute to the laboratory team and Professor Inada-Kim in our hospital in Winchester, who are helping to lead the national effort to tackle AMR in our NHS.

The UK has a proud history of leading on global health. It was here that Sir Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin, revolutionising modern medicine. Edward Jenner's smallpox vaccine laid the foundation for immunisation efforts that have saved hundreds of millions of lives. British researchers helped eradicate rinderpest in cattle, the only other disease besides smallpox to be wiped out completely. Today, smallpox is gone. Rinderpest is gone. One day, we hope to say the same about polio, but that vision is now at risk. I recently visited the rotary club in Winchester and learned about the long involvement of rotary clubs worldwide in supporting polio eradication over a period of many years. The US withdrawal forces us to consider how we reaffirm our leadership in global health.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): Twenty years ago, Nelson Mandela stood in Trafalgar Square waging a war on poverty. As my hon. Friend will know, he was also the first chair of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, which has inoculated more than 1 billion children and saved 18 million lives. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Labour Government must fulfil their commitment to Gavi, and not fall behind? Even the Conservative Government said that they would fund Gavi properly. Mandela's life reminds us, does it not, that the great victories are often in times of darkness, like today?

Dr Chambers: You are completely right about that very important organisation, which I shall come on to shortly. We cannot highlight enough to the impact that Gavi has had.

The World Health Organisation must adapt. This crisis highlights the need for a more resilient system, one that does not depend so heavily on any single nation. The UK must lead efforts to strengthen the World Health Organisation by broadening its funding base and encouraging greater collective responsibility among member states. At the same time, we must invest in our own global health capabilities, which means strengthening research funding, protecting key collaborations, and engaging with middle-income nations to forge new partnerships. Global health security is not just about pandemics; it is about economic stability, national security, and the long-term wellbeing of our people—and let us be absolutely clear: disease does not respect national borders. A threat anywhere in the world is a threat to the UK. If polio still exists anywhere, it is still our problem. If antibiotic resistance is surging in one part of the world, it will reach our hospitals. If a new pandemic emerges in a distant country, it will be on our doorstep faster than ever before.

When it comes to global public health, "nobody wins unless everybody wins."

Those are the words of Bruce Springsteen, but they apply as much to public health as they do to any other struggle. If we allow global health systems to weaken, if we turn our backs on international collaboration, we are not just failing others; we are failing ourselves.

[Dr Chambers]

However, this is also an opportunity. The UK has a chance to lead the world in global health innovation while strengthening our economy. We have significant human capital available through our universities, businesses, learned societies and research institutions, and if we invest now we can become a global hub for public health expertise, vaccine development, artificial intelligence and cutting-edge medical research. We should also remember the power of our capacity to offer education and training as cost-effective interventions. We can export solutions, shape international policy, and create high-skilled jobs right here at home. The last Government saw universities as a battleground for culture wars. We must see them as engines of innovation, global collaboration and economic growth. They should not be political footballs; they should be powerhouses of discovery, opportunity, and progress. If we get this right, we will not just be protecting global public health, but securing Britain's place as a leader in the industries of the future.

The US has made itself and the world weaker. The UK now has a choice: we can watch as global health security unravels, or we can take decisive action to lead, collaborate, and strengthen the systems that keep us safe. With the UK's aid budget being stretched thin, not least by the diversion of funds to cover domestic asylum costs, there is growing concern that our leading contributions to the work of Gavi, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding), could be significantly reduced. That work has vaccinated over a billion children—over half the world's children—and supports cutting-edge efforts to tackle major causes of death such as malaria. Let me ask the Minister two questions: how can we justify cutting support for an organisation that has saved over 18 million lives, and will the Government commit to restoring overseas development aid to 0.7% of GDP, to ensure that lifesaving initiatives such as Gavi and other key World Health Organisation initiatives can remain viable?

This is not charity. This is global health security, preventing outbreaks before they spread, reducing suffering, and strengthening healthcare systems in some of the world's most fragile regions. This is a question of national security, moral responsibility and economic opportunity. I urge the House to ensure that the UK does not waver in its commitment to a healthier, safer, and more prosperous and secure world.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Before I call the Minister, may I remind Members that when they use the word “you”, they are addressing the Chair?

4.28 pm

The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds): I thank the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) for securing this debate on such an important topic, and I am grateful to the other Members who are in the Chamber.

This Government are aware of the implications of the US Government's initial decision to pause their overseas financial assistance while they undertake a review, including where that is accompanied by stop-work orders. We are monitoring those impacts closely through our diplomatic missions overseas and with other international partners. Of course, decisions on US policy

are a matter for the US Government; I know the hon. Gentleman is well aware of that. We welcome the news that emergency food aid and lifesaving humanitarian assistance should be exempt from the pause during the review period.

I point out that these are early days for the new Administration, and it would not be appropriate—I know Members would not expect us to do this—for us to give a running commentary on each announcement and executive order issued by the US Government. Members will know that the US has a strong track record in global health and international development, and we have enjoyed close bilateral co-operation with it in pursuit of our shared objectives in this area. I was pleased to hear the hon. Member for Winchester rightly refer to that collaboration. Naturally, we are very keen for that to continue.

For our part, this Government are committed to working with others through genuine, respectful partnerships with donors, multilateral organisations and countries across the global south, so that we maximise our impact at home and overseas. This is an important part of how we fulfil every Government's first responsibility: to keep people safe—the hon. Member for Winchester was right to refer to security in the context of this debate. It is also important for pursuing this Government's guiding mission, which is to grow the economy and bring opportunity to people in our country, and to make progress towards our shared global goals for sustainable development during this decade.

Our work on global health is crucial. Since I took up my role over six months ago, I have making been the case for action right around the world, on my visits to some of the countries most affected by the diseases that the hon. Member for Winchester talked about, and at major global summits. He will be aware that we are in the middle of a spending round process, so I am not in a position to outline specific investment plans—I know he would not seek to encourage me to do that—but I want to reassure Members that this Government will be at the forefront of international work on improving global health as a priority for our country.

It is the right thing to do, as the hon. Member for Winchester articulated, and it is the smart thing to do. No country can thrive if its people cannot thrive. In today's interconnected world, we have all seen the impact of shocks in healthcare and communicable disease ripple right around the world. We saw that with the covid-19 pandemic above all, which harmed our health in the UK and all our global economies. To use the phrase that he rightly kept repeating, deadly diseases do not respect borders, nor does antimicrobial resistance, which he pointed to as another major challenge for us in global health terms. They threaten us all, and it takes a concerted international effort to tackle them, so we are working with countries around the world to help them develop the systems they need to tackle the health threats they face.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for her comprehensive response to the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers), who set the scene very well. In my constituency of Strangford, I think of the Church groups, and in particular of the Elim Missions, which has a very constructive and positive strategy for Zimbabwe and Swaziland. In Swaziland, the number of people who have AIDS is at almost epidemic levels, but one of the

things the west—the USA, the UK and others—can do is provide medications that can preserve life and help people to live longer than they ever have. That happens because of what the Government do but also because of what the Churches do. The Minister is always very helpful in her responses. Could the Government look at working more closely with the churches to make lives better?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the hon. Member for that really important point and for his kind words. He is right to pay tribute to the incredible civil society that we have working on these issues right across the United Kingdom. He refers to the important work that church groups do with communities affected by HIV/AIDS and other diseases.

I was really pleased to hear the hon. Member for Winchester talk about the role of the Rotary group in seeking to combat polio, and I have been absolutely delighted to be working as a polio champion with some of the organisations campaigning on this issue, particularly the global programme to eliminate polio. It is really important that we seek to work together on these issues, and the Government are reviewing our strategy on civil society. I will make sure that the issue of health activism is fed into that process, because it is really important. We need to make sure that we face up to the ongoing threats together.

The hon. Member talked about the threats from communicable disease being intensified by the climate crisis and environmental degradation. He was right to do so, but we also see non-communicable disease becoming more frequent in many countries in the global south, and there is still a potential threat from pandemics too. We are also working with others to champion sexual and reproductive health rights and freedoms for all, including as a key part of our work to empower women and girls.

We are investing in global health work that we know provides excellent value for money, reaching millions of people and maximising the impact of every single pound that we put in. I was really pleased to hear Gavi mentioned by the hon. Members for Winchester and for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding), who has so much international expertise. Our support to Gavi, the global vaccines alliance, is enabling it to immunise 300 million children and save up to 8 million lives from vaccine-preventable diseases over four years. That support for Gavi's multilateral and engaged action internationally is clear, as I set out to the International Development Committee. I will not repeat that here, for reasons of time.

Similarly, the global fund to fight AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria has saved over 65 million lives since 2002 and reduced the combined death rate of the three diseases by 61%. The UK has played a significant role in that success. In addition, the UK's support for the child wasting innovation programme has helped it to raise financing from others, enabling treatment for 850,000 children. The multilateral architecture is critical here, and I was really pleased to hear the hon. Gentleman underline the importance of the World Health Organisation. The UK will remain a strong supporter of the World Health Organisation. He hopefully saw that we recently announced new funding for the WHO in support of its delivery and transformation agenda. We will continue

to work closely with the WHO and its member states to strengthen the organisation, so that it can help countries to meet the health challenges of our times.

The UK's national risk register estimates that there is up to a 25% probability of another pandemic in the next five years. That is one of the reasons why we remain committed to securing a pandemic accord at the WHO. Getting better at preventing and preparing for pandemics matters immensely for global health security, but also for UK health security and for this Government's mission to build a national health service that is fit for the future.

The hon. Gentleman was right to say that the same applies to the threat of antimicrobial resistance. The UK is already seeing thousands of deaths that are attributed to antimicrobial resistance, and I was pleased to hear about the work of Dr Matthew Inada-Kim at Winchester University. I am also extremely proud of the work of Sally Davies, who has been working on these issues with the UK Government and Lord Darzi. The UK Government worked really hard to agree an ambitious global set of actions against AMR at last September's high-level meeting, which was dedicated to that subject, and we will keep driving that work forward.

Before I wrap up, I want to shine a light on the wider work of the UK's world-class scientists and public health and medical institutions. Harnessing the huge wealth of talent and expertise here in the UK is fundamental to the new approach to development that this Government are adopting. The UK's scientists do a huge amount to address global health and development challenges by advancing our understanding of disease, pioneering work in genomic medicine and developing novel vaccines. I was really delighted to hear the passion with which the hon. Gentleman talked about this issue, and I have seen for myself the immense ambition of labs here in the UK, such as the Jenner Institute. Please forgive me if I smile, Madam Deputy Speaker, because I am very proud to represent the constituency where the Jenner Institute is based, and I visited it recently.

British scientists have helped to develop two malaria vaccines that have the potential to save millions of lives. Thanks to the expertise and brilliance of British scientists, the dream of eradicating malaria looks increasingly possible. The hon. Member for Winchester quoted Bruce Springsteen, and I hope that the "glory days" for those scientists will come when we finally globally eradicate malaria. If we manage to do that, it will be because of those incredible efforts. We talked about Gavi earlier, and with the UK's support, it plans to roll out these new vaccines to 25 countries this year.

Our health, life sciences and pharma sector is second only in value to that of the US. It has an annual turnover of £50 billion, with £25 billion a year in exports, and it supports 115,000 high-value jobs, which the hon. Member rightly referred to. I will finish by saying how proud we can all be of the work that our country does on global health. It is good for us here in the UK and for people across the globe, and it is a key part of how we make sure that as many of us as possible can keep working together in partnership towards the safer, healthier and more prosperous world that people everywhere want and deserve.

Question put and agreed to.

4.41 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 11 February 2025

[MATT WESTERN *in the Chair*]

Cost of Energy

9.30 am

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the cost of energy.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Western. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting me this debate. The cost of energy is a problem that impacts all areas of our lives, from the homes we live in to the businesses we work for.

For far too many, high energy bills are an immediate daily concern. A recent poll published by Opinium highlighted that, on average, 88% of all adults thought it was important that the Government focus on reducing the cost of energy over the next two years, while 90% remained concerned about the increase in energy prices. The cost of energy has become a key strain for most households. For households in Bath and across the country, bills continue to rise at unprecedented rates, and many struggle to keep up.

Those rises will heap considerable pressure on millions of people who are still feeling the pressures of inflation over the past few years. That is simply unacceptable, and it is a crisis that we cannot ignore. The effects of high energy costs extend far beyond the immediate financial burden; the cost of electricity in the UK is also holding back our efforts to decarbonise the economy and to address the climate crisis, and we must not shy away from that debate.

At present, UK households pay roughly the same for both gas and electricity bills—around £850—despite using more than four times more gas than electricity, making electricity in the UK four times more expensive than gas. That price imbalance is not only creating financial hardship for consumers, but actively deterring them from making the switch to cleaner, more efficient heating systems. The UK currently relies on 25 million fossil fuel boilers to heat its homes, accounting for 16% of the nation's entire CO₂ emissions. Decarbonising our heating sector is a significant opportunity for the UK to cut down on carbon emissions.

Take heat pumps, for example, one of the most advanced and environmentally friendly ways to heat our homes. Heat pumps are four times more energy efficient than gas boilers and could reduce CO₂ emissions by 75%, yet just 1% of UK households have a heat pump. Why? Because the UK's electricity prices consistently undermine the financial incentive to install them. With the current cost of electricity, running a heat pump can be more expensive than running a gas boiler for larger households and as expensive for medium-sized homes, even though heat pumps are far more efficient.

In Sweden, more than 50% of single-family homes have heat pumps installed, while 95% of all new homes are now heated by heat pumps. The success of Sweden's heat pump adaptation hinges on the country's price ratio between gas and electricity, effectively incentivising electric heating systems compared with fossil fuel ones.

A range of other heating technologies can work alongside heat pumps. Alternative technologies such as heat batteries are another example where the price of electricity is significantly hindering the UK's ability to move away from gas. Heat batteries have become a proven solution for about 20% of UK homes for which heat pumps are not suitable. Modern heat batteries can operate at equivalent temperatures to fossil fuel systems; they can make use of the existing pipes and radiators in the home, at a similar running cost to a heat pump, and embed valuable flexibility in the electricity system. Despite having such innovations at our fingertips, the Government continue to drive consumers into the arms of gas boiler manufacturers, because more often than not it is still cheaper to buy a gas boiler.

The disparity in energy prices between gas and electricity is not just a domestic issue; it is part of a broader trend in which the UK is falling behind other nations in the transition to low-carbon heating. In the first half of 2024, gas prices in the UK were 22% below, while electricity prices were 27% above, the EU average. In fact, the UK had the highest ratio of electricity to gas unit prices in the entire EU at that time. That pricing imbalance places the UK at a competitive disadvantage in terms of decarbonisation.

As the rest of Europe steams ahead with its effort to electrify heating, the UK is lagging behind due to our higher costs of electricity, something that not only affects individual households and businesses, but significantly undermines the UK's position as a world leader of climate action. To achieve our statutory net zero goals, we need to make sure that the transition to clean energy is as affordable as possible for everyone. The current energy pricing structure is holding us back, and that must change.

The first and most urgent step is to reform the policy costs currently placed on electricity bills. The regressive and incoherent stack of levies on electricity bills has inflated the cost of electricity for consumers to the point that it is uncompetitive with gas. The Government's current energy policies are therefore working against their own objectives, making clean technology more expensive than its fossil fuel counterparts.

As things stand, policy costs and levies currently account for 11% of a typical household's total energy bill, but they are not allocated evenly. Policy costs account for 16% of a typical electricity bill, but only 5% of a typical gas bill. There is widespread industry and political support for reforming those policy costs and levies, but the argument over how to do so has been going on for far too long. The simplest options for reform would be to remove all levies from electricity and put them into general taxation. That would lower energy bills for every household in Britain, but at a very high cost to the Exchequer, which is currently not realistic.

Another option is to rebalance the levies by moving them from electricity to gas. This option would be good news for the 4.5 million households that do not use gas heating, but for the 22.5 million gas-using households, of which 2 million to 3 million are in fuel poverty, bills would rise by between £15 and £100 a year.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Some 17.6% of those who live in Keighley are in fuel poverty. Right now, Labour-run Bradford council wants to raise

[Robbie Moore]

council tax by 10% and, with the removal of the winter fuel allowance, 64,000 pensioners across the wider Bradford district will be impacted. Does the hon. Member agree that, for the most vulnerable in our society, there needs to be more support not just with the cost of energy, but with making sure that they can keep warm during this winter period?

Wera Hobhouse: The hon. Member predicts my next point: it is important to emphasise the Government's responsibility to look after the most vulnerable in our society and protect them during any efforts to rebalance gas and electricity prices. However, I cannot comment on the council tax bill to which he refers; that is, of course, a local matter.

It is imperative that any policy changes prioritise the needs of those vulnerable households, ensuring that they are not left behind as we look to electrify the UK's heating system. A more focused way to adjust policy funding could be to collect revenue from levy-funded programmes through a single levy control system. Such a system would have two straightforward rates—one for electricity and one for gas—set by Ministers at an appropriate level. These rates would be based on the cost per kilowatt-hour, so more energy-efficient technologies would have lower taxable amounts, making them comparatively more affordable.

Unlike other rebalancing methods, this approach would allow the Government to directly manage the impact on households. As electricity is always more efficient than fossil fuels, its price would go down, encouraging more people to switch. Policy reform is an essential step towards addressing the unacceptable price disparity that currently exists in the UK between gas and electricity. I hope the Minister has listened very carefully to the proposal that I have just put forward.

The impact of Brexit on our energy system has been somewhat brushed under the carpet. The turbulence of covid and the shockwaves from Russia's invasion of Ukraine have dominated the conversation and masked the quieter, but significant, effects of our departure from the EU's energy framework. One of the most pressing issues is passive divergence: not following new EU regulations simply because we are no longer a part of the system.

That is not always a deliberate choice, but it is already creating challenges, particularly in electricity trading. The UK was once part of an integrated, efficient energy market with the EU, where electricity flowed freely, reducing costs and improving security. Now, without alignment, we risk inefficiencies, higher prices and reduced energy security. We need strategic decision making. Not all divergence is bad, but it must be a conscious, informed choice, based on clear evidence, not ideology.

When it comes to energy, the benefits of co-operation with the EU are overwhelming. Shared markets bring stability, common rules ensure fair trade and joint planning strengthens resilience against global energy shocks. The EU and the UK share the same fundamental energy challenges in securing affordable, clean and reliable power for the future. Our interests remain aligned and so should our approach. We must ensure that divergence, where it happens, is a decision and not an accident.

In addition, we need to focus on policies for community energy. We Liberal Democrats have long championed the idea of community energy. Community energy currently accounts for less than 0.5% of total UK electricity generation capacity. However, according to the Parliamentary Environmental Audit Committee, with the right Government support, the sector could grow 12 to 20 times by 2030, powering 2.2 million homes and saving 2.5 million tonnes of CO₂ emissions every year.

I welcome the Government's inclusion of the local power plan in the Great British Energy Bill, which marks a welcome step forward for the community energy sector. The plan intends to deliver an ambitious target of 8 gW of renewable energy projects by 2030, in partnership with local authorities and communities across the country. To achieve that target, significant scale-up of local and community-owned energy will be required and we will need a support programme in place for community energy organisations in England, drawing on successful models from Scotland and Wales.

Bath and West Community Energy, a community benefit society, has reduced carbon emissions by an average of 3,300 tonnes per year with its around 31 renewable energy projects. Let us make sure every community across the country has something like Bath and West Community Energy in its patch. As we have repeated many times, community energy reduces bills, creates local jobs and accelerates the transition to a low-carbon future.

Home insulation is another key area to reduce energy costs, particularly in my Bath constituency, where much of the housing stock is old and in dire need of insulation. Insulation remains one of the most effective ways to reduce energy demand, lower bills and cut emissions, but the Government have significantly delayed the implementation of their warm homes grants. The scheme was not implemented this winter and will only operate from next winter. The Government must tackle the efficiencies of these schemes head-on, ensuring that residents receive retrofit measures that provide value for money and stand the test of time. The Select Committee on Energy Security and Net Zero will look into those issues tomorrow, and I hope people will listen very carefully.

To accelerate and de-risk delivery of the warm homes plan, the UK Government should create a national expert advice service for England so that households have the confidence to receive tailored advice to upgrade their homes. Doing so would deliver consistent outcomes across the country and end the postcode lottery in advice services.

I hope the Government consider the points outlined today. We need long-term solutions that will make clean energy affordable for all, meet our net zero targets and lift the pressures on families of rising energy costs.

Matt Western (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate.

9.44 am

Mike Reader (Northampton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Western. I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse)—a fellow member of the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee—for introducing this important debate.

We have been doing a lot of work over recent weeks in the Committee on energy pricing and the cost to consumers, so it is very timely.

It is clear that the Government have an ambitious plan to achieve clean power by 2030. For families in my constituency and across the country, that mission is really about lowering energy bills. Quadrupling offshore wind, tripling solar, doubling onshore wind and getting projects such as Hinkley over the line and operational are all critical things that will ensure resilience in our energy markets. Importantly, they will also protect UK consumers from volatile foreign markets, taking back control from Putin and petrostates, and placing the power of energy in the hands of British people. Those targets represent the biggest expansion of renewable energy in our history, and could save families hundreds, if not thousands, of pounds a year on their energy bills.

I recognise the great points made by the hon. Member for Bath in her opening speech, particularly on innovation in the sector. I also welcome her thoughts on heat pumps because I, too, believe that more than just heat pumps can solve this crisis, and it was positive to hear her talk about heat batteries. I want to add to the debate by speaking more about the energy cost crisis the Government are tackling, how it started and what we need to do to solve it.

The Select Committee heard evidence that paints a stark picture. Average energy bills are now 43% higher than in 2019, with over 6.1 million people living in fuel poverty. The situation in my constituency reflects the national crisis, with families and businesses struggling under the astronomical weight of energy costs.

However, the crisis did not happen overnight; it is the direct result of years of Conservative failure to properly insulate our homes, diversify our energy sources, reform the energy market and, ultimately, protect consumers. The previous Government's resistance to onshore wind, their devastating cuts to energy efficiency programmes and their reckless over-reliance on volatile international gas markets has left British taxpayers paying the price.

When the last Labour Government left power, energy efficiency installations were at their peak, with 2.3 million homes upgraded, but the next Government dropped support and the numbers plummeted. As was mentioned, we now have some of the least efficient housing in the whole of Europe. The consequences of those decisions are felt every day by my constituents, who find themselves living in poorly insulated homes. There are 17,000 homes in Northampton South with an energy performance certificate rating of C or below. Those homes waste energy, but also my constituents' money.

The fundamental issue is clear: we must break our dependence on gas if we want energy bills to come down. As Ofgem's chief executive officer told the Committee a few weeks ago, unless we transform energy infrastructure we will remain at the mercy of volatile international gas markets. The evidence shows that, in a clean power system, even a major shock of the kind we have seen in recent years would see bills rise by an average of 9%, versus 44% following the gas crisis in 2022. That is why this Government's mission for clean power is so vital. It is not just about the climate; it is about bringing bills down. Under questioning from our Committee, Ofgem's representatives agreed that the target, while ambitious, is very achievable. However, they also warned that, without urgent action on planning reform and supply chains, we risk missing that crucial deadline.

We must also acknowledge the historic failures of market regulation. Consumer debt has now reached an astronomical £3.82 billion, which is nearly double what it was two years ago. When we pressed Ofgem representatives on what would trigger serious Government intervention, they could not give a clear answer, but it is clear that something more has to be done. The chief executive admitted that they should have developed much more detailed rules on prepayment meters and market regulation much earlier, rather than relying on broad principles that left vulnerable customers exposed. Even now, Ofgem acknowledges significant gaps in its powers to protect consumers, particularly around data sharing between Government Departments to identify vulnerable households that need support.

The Committee dug into one particular example: the regulator's handling of supplier failures, which is deeply problematic. We were told that when energy companies went bust, the shareholders were able to walk away with hundreds of millions of pounds of energy hedges, while taxpayers were left picking up the bill. Ofgem admitted to us that it lacks the power to recover those funds on behalf of the taxpayer, so hundreds of millions of pounds have been lost to those who have gambled on our energy market. That is a striking example of how the market has been stacked against ordinary people. The regulator's director of markets did acknowledge to the Committee that some suppliers are still not compliant with new financial resilience requirements, but he could not assure us as to what actions Ofgem would take if those suppliers fail to meet the deadline by March.

Moving to clean power is essential, and we must take immediate action to protect vulnerable households. That is why I support the move to a social tariff; a discounted energy scheme for low-income households would make sure that we build a fairer, greener and more sustainable energy system for everyone. At its core, a social tariff is a targeted discount on energy for people on low incomes, which would act as a vital safety net and ensure that nobody must choose between heating and eating. A social tariff could provide a guaranteed below-market rate for eligible households, with automatic enrolment for those who qualify. There would be no complex switching around or shopping around, just straightforward help for those who need it.

The evidence shows that 6.1 million households now live in fuel poverty, with many of those who are struggling paying a poverty premium. They are using prepayment meters or are on standard variable tariffs, which is simply wrong. A properly designed and implemented social tariff would be mandated across all suppliers, so that no one misses out; it would automatically enrol eligible households, using existing data to remove barriers to entry; and it would deliver real savings for those most in need.

As one of the richest economies in the world, we should make sure that everyone can afford to keep their homes warm. The technology and the mechanism exist, but now we need the political action to make it happen. Achieving clean power by 2030, combined with proper consumer protection and targeted support, will bring bills down for good. The previous Government's failures have cost families dearly, and I urge Members on both sides of the House to use their voice to call for greater protection for energy users and greater power for regulators, and to call out the profiteering of energy companies at times of crisis.

9.52 am

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western. The cost of energy is a crisis hitting every household in the country; it is not just a crisis of affordability but a crisis of national security, a crisis of climate and a crisis of social justice, but the Government have failed to act with urgency.

Russia's assault on Ukraine has made clear the dangers of energy dependence, and we can no longer afford to be dependent on fossil fuels. Investing in home-grown renewable energy is about not just cutting bills but safeguarding our energy security to protect ourselves from geopolitical shocks. Climate change is an existential threat, with global temperatures driving wildfires, floods and droughts. With those come food and water insecurity and displacement, which in turn fuels conflict.

We need a Government willing to make tough choices to invest in clean energy and to ensure that the UK is not left behind in the global transition. Many areas require urgent reform. We need incentives that cover the real costs of installing heat pumps, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) outlined. We must also create a rooftop solar revolution by expanding incentives for households to invest in solar panels. That includes a guaranteed fair price for electricity sold back to the grid, which would tackle the twin cost of living and climate crises.

We must get the basics right and invest in insulation: cold, inefficient homes mean higher energy bills, fuel poverty and a staggering £1.4 billion NHS bill for treating cold-related illnesses. The UK has the oldest housing stock in Europe, with one fifth of homes built more than a century ago. A national strategy for retrofitting pre-1920 homes is long overdue, and the Liberal Democrats would launch an energy insulation programme, starting with free retrofits for low-income households.

We must also protect the vulnerable—now. The Government's decision to axe the winter fuel payment was the wrong choice at the wrong time, stripping support from pensioners just as another cold winter bites. The Liberal Democrats would restore that help by introducing a social tariff for vulnerable households, raising the funds for it by imposing a proper windfall tax on oil and gas giants profiteering from this crisis.

The cost of energy is pushing people into hardship today, and without action it will do for years to come. Just in Epsom and Ewell, 6,518 people are living in fuel poverty. I welcome the work of the many community centres that provide warm hubs, but frankly they should not be needed. We must support households by restoring winter fuel payments, introducing a social tariff and driving a rooftop solar revolution. We must cut bills by investing in clean energy, making homes more efficient and ensuring that those who have done the right thing and gone green are not penalised. This is about security, sustainability and fairness. The Government must act; the cost of inaction is simply too high.

9.55 am

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Western. This country has been in need of a coherent national energy policy for a long time, as the lack of one has left us in a difficult place. Figures from June 2024 show that UK energy prices are 27% higher than those of our EU counterparts.

That has made energy-intensive industries unviable and is a major problem for all of us. Many millions of households in England live in fuel poverty, and total energy debt across the country is estimated to be £3.8 billion—indeed, in my constituency, it is one of the biggest causes of people slipping into debt.

The part of the solution that I want to focus on today is community energy. It is welcome that the Government are getting behind renewable energy projects, but they are paying little attention to gaining public consent. The great advantage of community energy is that it is generated locally, requires no unpopular transmission systems and benefits the very people who have to put up with the local infrastructure and the potential loss of green space. The best way to get local consent for a new solar or wind farm is to let local people benefit from the energy directly.

Unfortunately, neither the previous Government nor this one have done enough to encourage the community energy industry. It remains too costly and bureaucratic for community energy companies to become energy providers. There is no sliding scale of fees to reflect the size or capacity of an energy project, which effectively rules out smaller enterprises. Furthermore, community energy companies have to sell the energy they produce at a fraction of its genuine retail value to registered suppliers. Absurdly, local communities are frequently unable to buy energy directly from the solar farm or windmill they can see from their windows. Communities are obliged to sell their energy back to the grid at a low price and buy it back at the marginal rate of gas, with transmission costs that had no need to be included. That is despite the fact that some community energy projects achieve a 75% reduction in per kilowatt-hour pricing.

Those obstacles are part of the reason why Community Energy Horsham in my constituency is struggling to get its solar energy project across the line. It has had council backing for a community-funded project to put solar panels on the Bridge leisure centre for some time, and I am sure it will happen at some point, but it has taken a few years already and the whole process is much more difficult than it needs to be.

We need a community electricity export guarantee to create a statutory right for sites with capacity below 5 MW that generate low-carbon electricity to export their electricity on their terms to an existing electricity supplier. We need a community electricity supplier services scheme to create a requirement on existing larger energy suppliers to work with community schemes so that they can sell the power they generate back to local customers.

Encouraging community energy is the democratic way to determine local land use. When local communities directly reap the rewards from community energy projects, it not only puts power—in every sense of the word—in the community's hands, but demonstrates the benefits of a greener energy transition, which is important for our net zero targets and the planet.

I urge the Government to put public consent at the heart of their energy strategy—indeed, I could say the same about their planning strategy, but that is a whole other debate. The best way to do that is to empower community energy schemes. Never mind Great British Energy, I want to see Great Horsham Energy and, indeed, Great Everywhere Energy.

9.59 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Western. I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for leading the debate. She has been assiduous, enthusiastic and committed on this issue, and we all owe her a debt for setting the scene so very well.

It is a real pleasure to see the Minister in his place. Mr Western, I will tell you what: as Ministers go, this is a hard-working one. He has done the lot—urgent questions yesterday, a statement yesterday, this debate today—all in a matter of hours. We look forward to his contribution to today's debate. It is also a pleasure to see the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) in her place as shadow Minister. In the last couple of years we have seen massive fluctuations in terms of energy prices, with thousands of households carrying the burden of that for many months. Energy prices have fallen since summer 2023, but there is little prospect of cuts soon. For that reason, it is good to be here to discuss the issue.

I will, of course, give a Northern Ireland perspective, and I have one big ask of the Minister. He probably knows what it is, and knew before we started, but I would be very keen to hear about his discussions with his equivalent in the Northern Ireland Assembly to see how we can work better here together to help our constituents back home. Global prices for gas, electricity and oil have been on the increase from summer 2021 after the pandemic. Furthermore, we witnessed a massive hike in prices after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. There are things that the former Government and this Government have had no control over, but there are also things that we can do.

For Northern Ireland customers it has been slightly different, because we are not controlled by the energy price cap in England. However, although Government support was provided, it was withdrawn in July 2023, leading to a very large hike that families are still struggling with. The Minister knows, having responded to my urgent question yesterday, the point that I am going to make about oil: 68% of households in Northern Ireland have oil as their main and primary heating and cooking sources. Since October 2023, the cheapest prices for Northern Ireland's largest supplier have been higher than prices under the cap in the rest of the United Kingdom.

The cost of energy can be monumental for local businesses, not just for the large chain businesses. The local, family-run small business is the one that will probably suffer the most. After the pandemic, I was approached by countless local businesses in my constituency that were simply unsure how they would survive. After so many years, many were facing the climax of their business. A local coffee shop I frequently used in the town where my office is had to close down as it was no longer sustainable. Energy suppliers back home, such as Power NI, can provide tailored plans for businesses, but the price is no different and businesses can often be forgotten.

It would be remiss of me to participate in this debate without mentioning the impact of the Government's decision to withdraw the winter fuel payment from pensioners. Many such pensioners in my constituency who have contacted me relied on that payment to get them through the winter. There are concerns not only

that this may plunge thousands of pensioners into fuel poverty, but about the massive potential health risks. Older individuals' struggling to afford adequate heating could increase the risk of respiratory illnesses, strokes and hypothermia. It is not an exaggeration to say that many of the elderly people that I know do not have and cannot afford to heat, so they do not turn it on, but they do put on extra clothes. It is distressing to visit elderly people and see them wrapped up like a polar bear—

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for giving way; he is making an excellent contribution. The radio frequency network that, as the Minister is aware, controls what many people in remote areas pay for heating will be switched off in June. At present, the replacement infrastructure is not there, so many people could inadvertently end up paying through the nose. I find that very worrying, so will the hon. Member, and perhaps later the Minister, tell us whether they agree that the data communication company needs to speed up its roll-out of cellular coverage as quickly as possible? We are only four months away from June, and it is a deeply worrying situation for pensioners in my constituency and many other remote areas.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Member for that intervention. The Minister has been listening, and I know that he does listen. The hon. Member has outlined a specific issue that is incredibly worrying. The older we get, the faster time goes; I am not sure whether that is right, but it seems to go faster. June will be here tomorrow—it will be that quick—so the crisis must be addressed today. I thank him for raising that and look forward to the Minister's response.

I will always ensure that the Minister and his Department are aware of the impact that this issue could have—and has had this winter—on health. We look to him for direction and, most importantly, reconsideration for the coming years. Schemes were available under this Government that were available under the previous Government and were set up to support families and households who were struggling, but they have now closed. Similarly, back home, the Assembly has previously taken steps to support people.

It is no secret that people are still struggling. On occasions when the price of energy is out of our hands, there are measures we can take to ease the burden. Despite the general fall in prices since early 2023, typical bills under the January to March 2025 price cap will still be 43% higher than in the winter of 2021 to 2022. The perspective of prices and costs today is really bleak, so I look to the Minister for direction and plans for the rest of the coming year to support our constituents.

Steps can be taken to reduce pressure: perhaps there could be a closer look at the impact of renewable solar energy or better dedication to financially supporting our constituents. Regardless, I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say, and to hearing about the planned integration between himself and his counterparts back home in the Northern Ireland Assembly, because we need to see the benefits of being a part of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We are very proud to be part of it, but we also look to Government here centrally to help us in the Northern Ireland Assembly and to help our constituents. I honestly

[Jim Shannon]

believe that the Minister has a heart for that, and I very much look forward to his response and to seeing how he can help us.

10.6 am

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Western. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing this important debate. I declare that prior to being elected, I spent the better part of a decade in renewable energy finance. While I would not claim to be an expert, I hope to bring some useful insights to this debate.

The cost of energy remains one of the largest issues faced by households across the country, and nowhere is that more apparent than in rural communities like West Dorset. Fuel poverty is a dire issue. In 2023, 13% of households were in fuel poverty, and nearly 40% of households were spending more than 10% of their annual income on energy. The situation is even worse for vulnerable families: nationally, nearly 900,000 single-parent households are living in cold homes.

It is a much-cited statistic that the UK has the highest energy prices in the developed world, but that is misleading, and in no small part based on an accounting issue. In 2000, just 3% of the UK's energy came from renewables; today that figure is 42%. Despite that progress, we are still paying energy bills tied to the price of fossil fuels because of the marginal pricing system, which means that all electricity is charged at the rate of the most expensive source, which is currently gas—a commodity that, like oil, is at the whim of international events and geopolitical fluctuations.

Between 2010 and 2021, the global average cost of electricity generated from a renewable energy source over its lifetime declined by 88% for solar, 68% for onshore wind and 60% for offshore wind. Yet, even as renewable energy has become drastically cheaper to generate, the wholesale cost of energy to consumers remains high. It is simply unacceptable that companies are making vast profits while households, particularly in rural areas, are struggling to afford the basic necessity of heating their home.

The Government could solve this problem by delinking fossil fuels and renewable energy pricing, as other countries do. Our wholesale energy price would then be the weighted average between the two, which would bring us on a par with the energy prices of other nations. Far more importantly, it would also reduce the cost to consumers. The Government must take decisive action to break the link between gas prices and electricity prices. The previous Government promised to review electricity market arrangements, and this current Government should do so. Creating a separate market for renewables and fossil-fuel generated electricity would make energy fairer and more affordable to consumers.

I will make one other appeal for action by this Government. It is a trope often repeated that we need to put more solar panels on roofs and car parks, rather than farmland. I do not disagree, but the trope fails to recognise that doing so is commercially unviable. If utility-scale solar—this is an oversimplification—costs 50p per unit to build, commercial rooftop is double that, and carports double that again. The value paid by energy companies for exported renewable energy is often

as little as 5p or 5½ p per unit, so utility scale is the only solar that works as a pure export model. That unit of electricity is then sold under a green energy tariff to consumers at a vastly inflated price. The only people who benefit are the energy companies.

Again, the Government have a relatively straightforward fix at their disposal: mandating a minimum export value. Yes, energy wholesalers will make less money, but I can live with that. More importantly, it would unlock investment in rooftop and carport solar, end the competition between food production and net zero, and ultimately reduce costs for consumers. Those are easy wins for a Government who claim to be committed to fighting climate change. Instead of following the advice of industry, the Government have chosen to axe winter fuel payments, stripping vital support for many of the poorest pensioners at a time when energy bills remain high—a decision that should be reversed.

The UK must take back control of its energy future. We cannot continue with a system where consumers are at the mercy of volatile international gas prices while energy companies rake in massive profits. We must end the outdated pricing model that ties renewables to the cost of fossil fuels, and we must unlock investment in rooftop and carport solar. We must ensure that the benefits of renewables reach the people who need them most and ensure that no family, child or pensioner is left struggling to heat their home when we have the tools to fix this at hand.

10.11 am

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Western. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on securing this morning's debate. I will not speak for too long, because we have had several debates on this issue; instead, I will focus on the key points that I think need hammering home.

For several years colleagues in the highlands and islands, and now my hon. Friend the Member for Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber (Brendan O'Hara) and I, have worked on the highland energy rebate campaign., which would mean a geographic rebate for people in the highlands and islands affected by higher fuel prices. I am not precious about the mechanism for that. There is a bit of kickback about a geographic mechanism, but it is a very useful debating tool because it hammers home the fact that there is a geographic discrepancy and discrimination for people living in the highlands and islands, and the north of Scotland more generally.

We need a solution from the Government, and we need it urgently. For decades, people in the highlands and islands have been paying more for their energy than those in almost any other part of the UK. They pay more for distribution, and no other part of the UK pays more for transmission. All that people see are wires and pylons. The energy infrastructure, much of it in the highlands and islands, is used to send energy hundreds of miles away, but that is not distributed across bills in the same way as the distribution charges are. For example, in the flat that I live in when I am down here in this place, I pay roughly 40p on standing charges, and at home I pay 60p-plus on standing charges. That is a third extra every single day on that standing charge, and that is the same for people across the whole of the highlands and islands, which puts it in perspective for folk.

For decades, successive Governments have failed to tackle poor regulation. Ofgem has shown little interest in dealing with energy prices in the north of Scotland. Twenty years ago, we were less focused on decarbonisation issues than we are now. We were trying to get people on grid because there were so many people off-grid in the highlands and islands. The authorities would not look at getting gas into more remote areas; that was very low on the priority list. I am not advocating that we should do that now; new technologies have come in since then and we need to focus on decarbonising our energy systems. But it evidences that this has been going on for a long time, and that solutions have not been found.

Governments have always focused on urban areas with big populations to the detriment of rural customers. That is not acceptable, because the highlands and islands of Scotland are the coldest parts of the UK and have the highest levels of fuel poverty per head of population. That major issue needs to be addressed.

I want to highlight a couple of strategic issues about generators. We have wind farms consented to produce many gigawatts, but they are not able to progress because the Ministry of Defence has not come up with a radar solution that will allow them to operate. That is a matter of urgency. It is about capacity within the MOD and the amount of effort that it has been able to put into coming up with a solution; it is not because there is no solution, but because not enough people are working on it.

As a consequence, we have big projects that would generate employment through their construction and would contribute to our net zero goals, but they cannot get over that hurdle, despite being consented and having passed all the other barriers. If they cannot get over that hurdle, those consents will fall and the projects will be lost. That needs to be urgently addressed, and I urge the Minister to do what he can to work with colleagues in the MOD to get some focus on that.

I welcome the work on social tariffs, on which the SNP has a manifesto commitment, and I know from colleagues in the Scottish Government that a lot of close working is going on with the Department, which I welcome. Hopefully we will see a positive resolution to that in the not-too-distant future.

Finally, it would be remiss of me not to mention the winter fuel payment. The £300 winter fuel payment has been lost to tens of thousands of people across the highlands and islands. That combines with the points I have already made—along with the cost of energy going up since the Government came in last July and the promise to reduce energy bills by £300 for the most vulnerable pensioners—so we are now looking for £780. I am not entirely sure how that £780 reduction in bills will be achieved, but that is essentially the position that the Government find themselves in—they need to find that for thousands of people in order to maintain that manifesto pledge, and it will be interesting to know how that is going to happen.

10.17 am

Mr Angus MacDonald (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) on securing this important debate. Much of what I was going to say has been mentioned, but I want to reiterate a few things.

How can it be that households on renewable electricity pay four times as much as those who get fossil fuel gas? That is inappropriate, not least because the cost of electricity generation from onshore wind was one third of the cost of generating electricity from fossil fuels, yet electricity bills remain nearly four times the price of mains gas. To put that into perspective, my parliamentary flat in London, which runs on mains gas, costs 5.8p per kilowatt-hour to heat, while my home in the highlands costs 23.7p. That premium is paid not just in the highlands, but across the countryside and in rural Britain, and in high-rise properties throughout cities across Great Britain. It is an enormous and painful gap. We all believe that net zero is the way ahead—we all support that—but we do not think that the current pricing is just.

In England, the level of fuel poverty is 13%, and as the hon. Member for Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey (Graham Leadbitter) said, it is much higher in the highlands at 47%. We have a dramatic problem with fuel poverty in the north of Scotland. In 2021, an estimated 16% of households that used gas for heating were classified as being in fuel poverty, and 41% of those who required electricity. There is a clear link between fuel poverty and lack of access to mains gas. That damages business as well: a hotel in rural Britain is paying £80,000 if it is using gas, but it would cost only £25,000 at most in a city for the same amount of heat. If the hotel was in the United States, the same amount of heat would cost only £10,000.

We have touched on the coupling of renewable energy and gas, and I do not think anybody would disagree that they need to be decoupled. I am sure that the Minister will talk about that. We have also touched on the environmental surcharges that are put on the electricity price, so 20% or more of an electricity bill, but just a fraction of a gas bill, is an environmental tariff. Ironically, it is people using renewable energy who are shouldering those environmental charges, not those using fossil fuels—mains gas.

I am glad that we have had this debate. I hope that the Minister will give an idea of how the enormous injustice of environmental charges, the standing charges and all the excess charges on renewables can be removed to balance things out with people who are relying on gas.

10.21 am

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western; you were a wonderful shadow Minister, and it is fantastic to see you here today. I praise the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing this debate. Hon. Members will rarely hear me heap praise on another political party, but at the risk of sounding as if I am working cross-party, I commend her for her excellent points.

I do not think any of us can argue with some of the points highlighting the exorbitant cost of electricity bills here in the UK, and I find the regressive levies on electricity bills quite shocking. I thought the hon. Member's innovative and positive policy solutions for reducing the cost of electricity bills were a welcome breath of fresh air; I hope that we can have further debates to bring forward those important points. I am more on the side of scrapping the levy, but I think we could come to a compromise about how to move forward.

[Joy Morrissey]

Many Liberal Democrat Members brought up the importance of community-owned energy schemes, and I advocate for Marlow community energy. It is important that hon. Members on both sides of the House are advocating for community energy schemes; that theme ran through most hon. Members' contributions and is an important aspect of energy to take forward.

It was wonderful to hear contributions from the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) about the great Horsham energy scheme and from the hon. Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello) with his expertise in energy. It is always welcome when people bring their professional expertise to the House.

We have also heard about the challenges in the highlands; I am sure that the Minister will be able to give further explanation about the plans and challenges for the highlands. Although they are producing renewable energy, and will probably produce even more, it will be interesting to see what capacity they will have.

Of course, I would be remiss if I did not comment on the wonderful hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and everything that he contributes to this House—his wonderful contributions and his praise for Members across parties, not only in this debate, but in every single Adjournment debate. We are lucky to have such a wonderful and hard-working Member.

The cost of energy affects every aspect of our economy; few things are more important for our economic success than the cost of energy. It affects the global competitiveness of our industries and therefore the number of jobs and our constituents' energy bills. The new Labour Government promised to cut energy bills by £300 by 2030—we are still looking forward to that—to create 650,000 jobs from the £8 billion that they are taking off taxpayers for Great British Energy, and to launch the era of clean, cheap, home-grown power. After more than six months in Government, however, it is clear that they will make energy more expensive, with bills going up, not down, and that they risk shutting down swathes of British industry, with jobs lost to more polluting countries. In short, their energy plans will result in lower growth, fewer jobs, higher energy bills and more carbon in the atmosphere.

We are constantly told by Ministers that renewables like wind and sun are the cheapest sources of energy, but that does not take account of the huge hidden costs of increased reliance on renewables. Again, I thank the hon. Member for Bath for bringing the important aspect of renewables to the forefront of the debate. Industry has already warned that trying to quickly produce a record amount of renewable capacity to meet the Government's 2030 target will push up the price and cost to consumers. The cost also depends on the generating capacity that we need to have in the background to kick in to keep the lights on when the wind does not blow and the sun does not shine.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): From what I am hearing, the hon. Member is making an anti-renewables, anti-action on climate change speech. She mentioned that electricity prices are some of the highest in Europe, but her party had been in government for 14 years when the Government inherited those high prices. Could you

confirm on the record that you think it is the Conservative party's position that all levies on bills to support renewables should be scrapped?

Matt Western (in the Chair): Order. I remind hon. Members to refer to each other as "the hon. Member" as opposed to "you".

Joy Morrissey: I welcome the hon. Member's contribution. It is wonderful to hear his commitment to the climate change emergency. We need to move forward as a country to make sure that our energy costs remain low. We did not commit to a £300 reduction in energy prices, nor did we commit to scrapping the winter fuel payment for pensioners. We went into the election without making those promises. I am simply holding the Government to account right now.

Luke Murphy: We are not talking about what was committed to in the manifestos. My question was about what the hon. Member said a few minutes ago, that she is committed to removing all the levies on bills related to renewables. Could she repeat that pledge?

Joy Morrissey: The hon. Member makes a wonderful point. Personally, I feel very strongly about this, and the glory of being in opposition is that I can hold the Government to account. I can have also a Backbench Business debate or an Adjournment debate of my choosing about my own passion projects. Not to digress, but if the hon. Member looks at the Water (Special Measures) Bill, he will see my passion project flourishing. I do not want to detract from this wonderful debate, but what I am saying is that we can find a cross-party solution to many of these issues. We want to be positive about the UK and its future.

Wera Hobhouse: I, too, would like some clarification from the Opposition. Is the hon. Member saying that renewable energy is a solution to lower energy bills and gets us to net zero, but that we do not really want it because it is too expensive? I was not quite clear whether her argument was for or against renewable energy. Could she clarify that?

Joy Morrissey: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. The Conservatives have an excellent track record of putting in renewables. We were the first to bring in the coal-free plan to tackle energy, so that is an important way of moving forward. I would like to continue moving forward with cheaper energy bills to make sure that we protect our energy security while ensuring that costs are low for both the consumer and industry.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I apologise for arriving at the debate rather late, Mr Western. Needless to say, as a former Energy Minister, I take an interest in these matters. Anyone who shares that interest will understand that we need a mix of energy between renewables and non-renewables. Renewable energy has to be tested on the basis of whether it is cost-effective. Some renewables are and some are not; it is as simple as that.

Joy Morrissey: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Some renewables are cost-effective and some are not; and some are a lot less energy-dense than gas or nuclear.

Edward Morello: I am struggling with the argument of renewable energy not being cost-effective. For the cost of the amount of generation that Hinkley C would deliver, we could deliver twice as much renewable energy generation. The strike price for offshore wind is far below any other source of electricity. So I am at a loss—across every single form of renewable energy, the generation price is below that of fossil fuels.

The hon. Lady talks about the previous Government being at the forefront of renewable energy generation, when they signed off new drilling licences for North sea oil. I feel I am living in cloud cuckoo land. There is no connection between what she is saying and the reality of market forces. Ask any wholesale energy price provider what their strike price is for renewables, and they will say that it is lower than for fossil fuels.

Joy Morrissey: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I ask that I be allowed to make progress in my speech, during which I will address many of the excellent points he raised. Let me go back to my earlier point about density and some renewables being more affordable than others. For example, acres of agricultural land need to be covered with solar panels to produce a fraction of the power that could be generated by gas power plants or small nuclear reactors.

The time has come to have a much more sensible and serious conversation about the true cost of renewable-based systems, not just repeating again and again that renewables are the cheapest form of energy. That is why the previous Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho), asked the Department to produce a full-system cost of renewable-based systems. If we are intent on decarbonising the entire grid by 2030, as the Government want, we must have a detailed assessment of what it will cost, and what it will do to our constituents' energy bills and our already high industrial energy prices. Since taking office, however, the current Secretary of State has scrapped that work. He is rushing headlong into renewable-based systems, without any idea of what it will cost the country and the economy.

There is also the issue of trust—trust for consumers and for those in industry. Throughout the general election campaign, the Prime Minister, the Chancellor, the Secretary of State and around 50 Labour MPs promised across the country to cut energy bills by £300. As soon as they got into Government, they refused to commit to that promise. Even worse, they decided to take the same amount from millions of pensioners in poverty. It is difficult to think of a bigger betrayal committed by an incoming Government.

Six months on, Labour voted against an amendment to make the Government accountable for that promise through Great British Energy—their energy company that is not going to generate a single watt of energy. The new chair of that company says that it is not even within its remit to cut bills by £300. Labour cannot spend weeks and months repeating such an explicit, clear and simple promise only to row back on it the second it gets into Government. Perhaps the Minister would like to tell constituents in Beaconsfield and across the country when they can expect to see £300 off their energy bills, and how much their bills will increase to in the meantime.

It is not just households that are worried about the cost of energy, but industry too. The same energy-intensive industries that wrote to the Government to raise concerns about their plans to hike the carbon price to the highest rate in the world also share the despair at the UK having among the highest industrial electricity prices in the world. In fact, the Department's data shows that we now have the highest industrial energy prices in the world, well above the International Energy Agency and EU average.

More than anything, our heavy and manufacturing industries need cheap energy. They need stable and reliable energy, which does not rely on the whims of the weather. As with the shutting down of the UK oil and gas industry, seeing British industry move overseas will not change demand. It just means that domestic production—with all the tax revenue, British jobs and the investment that it brings—will be replaced by higher-carbon imports from abroad. Ministers say that decarbonisation cannot mean de-industrialisation, but if our industries, which are the hardest to decarbonise, cannot cope with the high cost of energy and therefore move abroad, that will be a disaster for our economy, devastating for our workers and their families, and will do nothing to reduce global emissions.

Ministers say that they want us to be global leaders. They want us to convince other countries to decarbonise, which is a noble goal. Climate change is a global issue, and there is no sense in our going it alone to cut our emissions when we produce fewer than 1% of global emissions. That is exactly why the Government need to change tack and stop our industrial energy prices rising any further. Countries around the world, which care deeply about holding on to their industrial and manufacturing base, are looking to the UK and other western nations to see what happens next. If they look at us and see industries being gutted by a misguided energy policy and see our people suffering from higher and higher energy bills, they will not want to follow us down the path to decarbonisation. We will be a warning, not an example, to the rest of the world.

Our ceramics, automotive, cement, steel, minerals, glass, aluminium and chemical industries need, above all else, cheap energy. I urge the Minister to talk to those businesses that are struggling with high energy costs and ask them what a carbon price of £147 per tonne of CO₂ would do to their businesses. The Minister might not like the answer, but the Government need to face the consequences of their policies.

The Government should be asking what arrangements will give us the cheapest, most reliable energy and how we get there. Instead, they are determined to decarbonise the grid by 2030 at any cost to meet a political target, even if that sends people's bills through the roof, offshores our emissions to polluting countries and leaves us at the mercy of Chinese imports. When facing the electorate at the next election, they will not be able to say that they were not warned.

10.38 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): Good morning; it is a pleasure to speak in this debate under your chairmanship, Mr Western. May I thank the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) for securing this debate and, actually, for all our engagements over the past seven

[*Michael Shanks*]

months? She always helpfully challenges the Government from a place of real passion and commitment, and I appreciate her words of wisdom, even if I do not always entirely agree with them. In fact, we have had countless debates on energy policy with a number of people in this room—it is beginning to become a bit of a weekly club here in Westminster Hall—and I appreciate all the points that have been raised.

May I say to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that I just cannot get enough of his contributions? Having not spent enough time in the Commons yesterday, we are back again today, but I am appreciative none the less. I will come to his points about Northern Ireland later.

I will start where the hon. Member for Bath started: on the public's view about the cost of energy. She made an important point about how central energy costs are not just to the cost of living crisis that our constituents are still living through, but to their belief in the Government's ability to change things, so it is important that we tackle these issues. As the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) rightly said, this Government were elected on a manifesto that contained pledges on energy. I am privileged to have the job of Energy Minister, because for the first time in a very long time we have a Government with a key mission to fix the energy system in this country. The truth is that it needs to be fixed because of what we inherited from the previous Government.

The energy crisis in 2022 was just the peak that highlighted how vulnerable we are to the rollercoaster of the fossil fuel markets. The cost of energy continues to have a devastating impact on our constituents and communities right across the country. Although consumers are protected to a certain degree by the energy price cap, our energy costs are determined by volatile markets outwith our control. As long as we remain exposed to that, the risk to our constituents is that we will face yet another price spike in the future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Mike Reader) made the point well that after 14 years of Conservative Government, we have to not just turn around one bit of the energy system, but deal with the whole series of occasions on which the previous Government failed to make decisions that would grapple with the scale of the problem. That is why I announced yesterday in the main Chamber our transitional support for Drax and biomass. The truth is that we got a good deal for consumers and for sustainability, but we had to make that decision. We had no other options because the previous Government left us with no long-term plan for energy security.

That is why we believe so firmly in our clean power by 2030 mission, which, by creating home-grown renewable energy, will help us to reduce our dependence on volatile fuel markets and will protect bill payers for good. Great British Energy will play a vital role in that mission by accelerating our deployment of clean energy so that Britain can become a clean energy superpower. Crucially, it will also invest in the supply chains that bring manufacturing jobs for renewable energy to our country.

Sir John Hayes: I understand the Minister's desire to create more economic resilience by ensuring energy independence. By the way, I should refer Members to

my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests in respect of this contribution and the previous one. The key thing is transmission and distribution costs, which make up 15% of every energy bill. No Government have looked at that seriously. If we distribute energy production to small solar plants spread right across the kingdom, we will maximise the costs and damage the resilience that the Minister seeks. Will he focus on the concentration of energy production and bring it as close to consumption as possible?

Michael Shanks: I will come to the right hon. Gentleman's point about transmission costs later, because it is important, particularly when it comes to how we grapple with constraint costs. The truth is that we will have to build more network infrastructure. I hope he will support the construction of that, although I suspect he will not. We also want to review energy market reforms to look at how we deal with some of these issues. I will come back to the important point, which a number of hon. Members raised, of how we build an energy system for the future. The question of balance is key. We do not want a renewables-only system, although renewables will be incredibly important. We announced last week our commitment to rolling out much more nuclear to provide the baseload and the security of supply. We have the ability to place small modular reactors across the country near centres of demand, such as the data centres that we will see in the future.

Edward Morello: The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey), representing the former Government, tried to mischaracterise the need to upgrade the grid as a cost of renewables, but does the Minister agree that we need to upgrade the grid regardless of what technology we use? We lose 10% of the energy we generate through transmission. It is an old grid and, regardless of the technology we use, we need to upgrade it.

Michael Shanks: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. Upgrading the grid is important for transmitting the clean power that we want to generate in the future, but it is already 50 or 60 years old, and it is creaking under the pressures it has operated under for a very long time.

There is real need to upgrade the grid right across the country. The truth is that the previous Government recognised that that was important. They launched the idea of the great grid upgrade before we did, but they are now running away from a lot of that. That is hugely disappointing, but it will not get in the way of our moving forward to make sure that we build the grid of the future. Yes, we need to meet the demand for now, but we know that by 2050 electricity demand is likely to double in this country. If we do not build the infrastructure now, it will be the weakest part of our economic strategy in the future. It is essential we build it now, but we want to bring communities with us.

Wera Hobhouse: Is it not also true that although we need to upgrade an old grid, the challenge of the future is a decentralised energy system, and that that is so often misunderstood? We had big power stations; now we have decentralised and smaller energy providers. That is a big challenge that we all have to recognise rather than criticising a particular Government—as tempting as it is to just criticise the Government of the day.

Michael Shanks: Never will it be said that I enjoy criticising the former Government.

I would flip what the hon. Member for Bath says on its head: that change also presents a real opportunity to look at the electricity system in a different way—I will come back to that point, particularly on community energy. It is right to say that the days of big cities with power stations right next to them are long gone, so we need to think of a different way to build our transmission system into the future.

On Clean Power 2030, advice from the National Energy System Operator said that the clean power system can be cheaper than today's system for consumers. Contrary to what some Members have said, we know that renewables are by far the cheapest to run. There is a cost to building them, but there is also a huge cost to building new gas or nuclear power stations that is often not factored into the debate. Renewables come at a cost but are then incredibly cheap to operate on our system.

The hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) spoke very passionately about climate change. That is really important. The mission we are on is about building an energy system for the future that gives us energy security, but it is also about tackling the climate crisis, which we can no longer think of as a future threat. As we look around the world, we can see from just this year alone that it is a present reality. It is increasingly difficult to read the statistics and not think that we should be taking more decisive action.

I gently say to the hon. Lady, as she prods this Government for not going fast enough, that in seven months we have launched the Clean Power 2030 mission, lifted the onshore wind ban in England—which was an absurd policy—and approved more solar than the previous Government did. We have had the biggest renewables auction in history, with 131 projects, we have created the pathway to clean power by 2030 and have already delivered record investment in the supply chains that will deliver some of the infrastructure upgrades we need, including £1 billion by ScottishPower. We launched the solar taskforce and the onshore wind industry taskforce. We are also looking at the Offshore Wind Industry Council and how it can deliver more. I am not sure we could move much faster, but if the hon. Lady has some suggestions, I am happy to take them on board.

Finally, on the point about the rooftop solar revolution, we agree that it needs to be not an either/or, but both. We will need ground-mounted solar, which plays a really important part, but we have rooftops right across the country—in car parks, warehouses and industrial units—that we should be covering in solar panels wherever we possibly can. We will do much more on that. We reconvened the solar taskforce, which the previous Government ran, to try and increase the ambition, and it will report in due course.

Jamie Stone: To return to my earlier intervention about the switch-off of the radio signal, on infrastructure, does the Minister agree that the data communication company must be exhorted and encouraged in every possible way to get on with the roll-out? Otherwise, people who are very vulnerable will pay more for their electricity.

Michael Shanks: I had a segue planned in my speech that was going to get me to the hon. Gentleman's point, but he pre-empted me, and he is quite right to do so.

He is right. This is a real challenge. The switch-off is the right thing for us to do in the long term—I think that everyone agrees that as a system that is outdated—but we do need to be absolutely certain that no one is left behind.

The Minister responsible for energy consumers, my hon. Friend the Member for Peckham (Miatta Fahnbulleh), has already had a number of meetings with Ofgem and with industry to make sure we speed up the roll-out. The service ends in June, as the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) said, and the taskforce that has been put in place to roll it out is now moving at pace. I think it is fair to say that it should have been moving faster up to this point, but they are very aware of the issues and we will keep that under review; it is of course essential that people are not left behind when the signal is switched off.

Moving on to short-term support, we recognise that by 2030 the clean power system will be crucial to bringing down bills in the long term, and to protecting consumers from the price spikes that we have faced in recent years. However, short-term support is important for households that are struggling with their bills while we are in that transition. That is why the Government continue to deliver the warm home discount, which gives a £150 rebate off energy bills for all eligible low-income households, and it is expected to support 3 million households across the country this winter.

The Minister for energy consumers has worked with energy suppliers to agree a £500 million industry support commitment to help specific customers who are struggling this winter. We also extended the household support fund until March 2026 with an extra £742 million, with additional funding for the devolved Governments as fuel poverty is devolved through the Barnett formula.

A number of hon. Members raised the question of a social tariff. My hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South made a passionate case for it, and we are looking at what bill support could look like in the future, including the possibility of a social tariff. I acknowledge that there is a broad consensus on the idea of a social tariff. The challenge is that it means different things to different people. One of the challenges that we are grappling with is how we define a social tariff, and how we can reach, in a very targeted way, the people who need it the most.

Part of that is the issue of data sharing, which a number of hon. Members have raised—that is, how we bring together the information that the Government have about the individual people who could most benefit from such a scheme. The Minister for energy consumers is leading that work, alongside industry bodies such as Energy UK and stakeholders. They are looking at how we can improve affordability and accessibility, and they are working with the Department for Work and Pensions on how we might be able to share some of the data that it has.

The question about levies has been raised by a number of hon. Members, and I think the Conservative party is now pledging to abolish levies entirely. It is an incredibly complex subject, but it is something that we want to grapple with, and we need to be very mindful.

I return to the point made by the hon. Member for Bath at the beginning of the debate. While the wholesale price will come down as we put more renewables on to the system, and as we squeeze off gas as the marginal

[Michael Shanks]

price, if bills do not come down because levies remain high, people will not see the benefit. It is really important to bring communities with us. The truth is, it is a complex issue. I am not going to stand here and say that we can just abolish levies, or that we can just transfer them entirely on to taxation. Neither option is possible in completion, but we are considering how we look at the future of levies, and we are open to suggestions from all parties on how we do that.

On the point about rebalancing—how we move electricity costs, in particular, on to gas—that is also a challenge. We want the number of people who use gas to decline in the coming years, as we decarbonise. The challenge will be making sure that we do not put charges on to a dwindling number of customers. Potentially and inadvertently, some of the poorest people in the country might be those who are the last to convert from gas to alternatives. I do not, for a second, dismiss the points that have been raised; they are incredibly important. However, I want to be very clear that we are working relentlessly in this Parliament on how we reduce the wholesale costs, and we want to make sure that it follows through on to consumers' bills.

Related to that, of course, is the point about standing charges on bills, which, as many hon. Members hear from constituents, seem to be such an unfairness because they are not based on consumption or on particular customers' circumstances. We are committed to looking at the future of standing charges. In December, Ofgem provided an update on reform. It included quite a radical proposal for introducing a new zero standing charge option under the energy price cap, which would give consumers greater choice in how they pay for their energy bills. It is for Ofgem now to consult on that proposal, which it will do this year. The driving force behind that will be making sure that any reforms are fair to all customers.

To underline that this is not straightforward and we cannot just simply abolish levies, I note that there would be unintended consequences if we were to transfer some of the costs on to other people. We could inadvertently find ourselves raising bills for some people without that being the policy intent. We are committed to reforming standing charges, but we want to do it in a way that is fair.

Mr MacDonald: Would the Minister spare a minute to talk about community benefits?

Michael Shanks *indicated assent.*

Mr MacDonald: Thank you very much.

Michael Shanks: I was not expecting the hon. Gentleman to stop at that point. I saw him in his place earlier and knew that I would talk about community benefits. I will turn now to the points about community energy and community benefits; both are important.

On community benefits, in all of this, we want to bring communities with us on this journey. That is important. We have made a very clear case that this Government intend to build the energy infrastructure we need, the transmission infrastructure we need, the homes that people need and the industry that people need to grow our economy, which is important. For far too long, this country has not built the infrastructure it

needs. In doing so, we want to streamline the planning process so that applications are dealt with far more efficiently and far faster, but we want to bring communities with us. That is absolutely vital.

We will be saying much more very soon about community benefits on several fronts. The first will be how we expand some of the community benefits for particular technologies. That process is already well established in Scotland, for example with onshore wind. The absurd policy of the onshore wind ban in England means that it has not developed as much, but we can look to Wales and to Scotland for advice on that. We also want to expand that to other technologies, particularly solar, which does not have the same community benefits at the moment, and to network infrastructure. I have always said that, if we build network infrastructure and a community is hosting that infrastructure that is essential for the country, it is doing a favour for the rest of the country and should feel some benefit from it. We will announce a package of community benefits shortly.

On the wider point about community infrastructure, we do not only want communities to benefit—we want them to actually own the infrastructure that gives social and economic benefits as well.

Graham Leadbitter: Will the Minister give way?

Michael Shanks: I will not, because I am going to come to the point made by the hon. Member. He has made the point about a highland pricing formula in the past—he is very reasonable about the issue—and it is something we will look at. The reform to the energy market will be part of that work as well. I am afraid I do not have time to come to much detail on mitigations on radar, apart from saying that we recognise the problem and we are working on it.

As always, this has been an incredibly useful debate. The passion from hon. Members is important, because this is one of the most important challenges facing our communities. We are committed to ensuring that energy is affordable for households across the country. Our clean power mission will help us deliver on that, but we have much more to do and we recognise that fact. We will work with Members from all parties, with industry and consumer groups, with charities and with individual constituents who raise these issues to make sure that we support everyone with this transition, to bring down bills in the long term and to support families with their energy costs.

10.58 am

Wera Hobhouse: I thank the Backbench Business Committee again for granting this debate, which has been very lively and engaged, and good-natured, despite some disagreements—but where would we be, if we all agreed? We would not need to debate.

I am grateful to everybody for their contributions and for the points that have been raised, and to the Minister for engaging very constructively on those points and concerns.

The bottom line is that energy costs and energy prices are too high for all our constituents and businesses. It benefits us all if we bring them down, not just to get to net zero and to bring costs down for consumers, but for the general prosperity of this country. Where will we be

if we cannot make the costs at which we produce things and warm our homes and so on lower than they currently are? This is the beginning of a debate and there is much more to do. I thank the Minister and all Members for their constructive contributions; I am sure we will be here again soon.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the cost of energy.

Regulation of the Bailiff Sector

11 am

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the regulation of the bailiff sector.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Western. I extend my gratitude to my hon. Friend the Minister for attending this important debate.

I will begin with a story. A vulnerable disabled person answered a knock at the door. He placed the chain on before opening it slightly, only for a bailiff to force their way through. The bailiff treated him, in his words,

“like a waste of life, a loser, scum”.

Worse still, the bailiff went on to wrongfully seize equipment supplied by the local authority to help with his disability.

That is not an isolated case. Today, I will share similar stories that expose the impact of a partially regulated sector, and make the case for urgent reform. My aim is simple: I would like the Government to legislate to introduce an independent regulator for the enforcement sector.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing a debate on this critical issue. There has been a rise in television programming showing people at their lowest being evicted or having their possessions repossessed. Often, we see the despair of ordinary people, and the bailiffs sometimes show a lack of compassion that should not be the standard. Does he agree that kindness and a basic level of respect have to be the foundation? To back that up—he is right—we need the legislation.

Mr Charters: I thank the hon. Member for his eloquent words about what is often the most challenging moment in people’s lives. That knock on the door is a cacophony of everything that they are facing, and we have to bear that in mind.

The Enforcement Conduct Board voluntarily regulates approximately 95% of the bailiff sector. However, the 5% who refuse to sign up are responsible, in my view, for the vast majority of the worst abuses. Even within the voluntarily regulated sector, problems persist. With hundreds of thousands of visits, millions of cases and billions collected annually, bailiff enforcement is a massive operation, but according to Citizens Advice, one in three people who have had contact with a bailiff have experienced behaviour that breaks Ministry of Justice rules. Even among regulated bailiffs, 1% of visits were deemed aggressive by the ECB in recent research.

We need a fair, proportionate and efficient collection system, which is why I am calling on my hon. Friend the Minister to set out a timetable to consult on legislation to introduce statutory regulation of the sector. I call on her to put the ECB on a statutory footing—something that charities and the ECB alike support. The fact that the sector is partially unregulated drives rogue bailiffs. I hope I can convince colleagues from across the House of the need for this change. There were some reforms under the May Government, but this is our chance, as a Labour Government, to stop rogue bailiffs for good.

[Mr Charters]

I turn to the link between debt and mental health. Debt does not exist in a vacuum; many people facing bailiff action are also dealing with illness, relationship breakdown or mental health struggles. One person shared their experience of over five years of pressure from bailiffs over council tax debt that they never understood and could not afford. That ultimately led to suicide attempts.

I struggled with whether to mention suicide today, but we cannot ignore these cases. Take the case of Jerome Rogers, a young man whose debt spiralled after bailiffs clamped the motorcycle he needed to work. Shortly afterwards, he took his own life. The coroner identified the debt collection agency's actions as a contributing factor to his death.

A woman recounted how a bailiff laughed and mocked her when she mentioned her mental health struggles. And Molly, whose name I have changed, was falsely threatened with prison if she did not grant entry to a bailiff—not a permissible threat, by the way. The stress triggered flashbacks of domestic abuse that she had suffered. I know my hon. Friend the Minister does terrific work on that.

Another victim, Poppy—also not her real name—suffered such severe anxiety over bailiff debt collection practices that she had a late-term abortion due to the stress of the situation. These are real stories, and there are so many more. For too long, rogue bailiffs have not met standards when it comes to vulnerability. That is why I dedicate my campaign for bailiff reform to the victims.

The effects of aggressive bailiff practices extend to children. One parent described how bailiffs had knocked so many times that they were left with nothing to take except their young daughter's cot. It is simply unacceptable for children to live in fear due to a lack of regulation in the bailiff sector.

As a former regulator at the Financial Conduct Authority, I understand the importance of setting clear standards. The last significant changes to bailiff regulations were introduced over a decade ago. It is time for an overhaul.

The Enforcement Conduct Board was established in 2021. It provides guidance but lacks statutory authority. Many firms voluntarily comply, but the absence of legal enforcement means that rogue bailiffs continue to operate with relative impunity. We must introduce statutory regulation to protect vulnerable customers, reduce the burden on the judicial system, improve transparency and provide a level playing field for the genuinely good bailiffs out there. Better standards would level the playing field and support good professional bailiffs to do their work.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western. I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this incredibly important debate. He makes a powerful point about statutory underpinning and giving legal powers to the ECB. We simply cannot have rogue bailiffs marking their own homework and the ECB being reliant on funding from bailiff organisations to clamp down on their actions. Am I right that part of the reason for seeking new

powers is to ensure that, instead of just revoking memberships, we can take legal action against rogue bailiffs?

Mr Charters: Absolutely. With that statutory underpinning, the ECB would have much greater avenues for enforcement. It has already done quite innovative work on the use of body-worn cameras and so on. Statutory underpinning would support its work even further.

This is not about punishing bailiffs who do their job correctly; it is about removing rogue operators and raising standards across the board. It is important to acknowledge the good work of the Enforcement Conduct Board, but I stress again that it is a voluntary regime, which can create problems as the ECB looks to toughen up standards. On this matter, there are points I would rather discuss privately with Ministers; there are always risks in the long-term survivability of any voluntary regime.

Let me touch on a few specific recommendations. I think we should introduce a vulnerable customers charter. Bailiff action is a distressing event for anyone, but for people with mental health problems it can be catastrophic. Aggressive debt collection leads many to take out high-interest loans, worsening their situation. A vulnerable customers charter would set out minimum standards of care. A bailiff registration service and a centralised register would help the public to verify all bailiffs' credentials, reducing fraud and ensuring accountability.

On delegating licensing powers to a regulator, currently, bailiffs must renew their licences in court every two years. A regulator such as the ECB could take that on and streamline the process, reducing pressure on our overstretched judicial system. Rather than resorting to aggressive collection, councils should work with debt advice charities to support people before they reach crisis point. I have heard of cases of aggressive bailiff action for debts as low as £10. We should look at introducing a bailiff services compensation scheme, inspired by similar schemes, to provide clear pathways for redress in cases of clear and historical misconduct by rogue bailiffs.

I will close with one final story. Michael, a StepChange client, said of his experience:

"The bailiffs are unregulated. It's like the Wild West. It's absolutely unruly."

I absolutely agree. We cannot allow this to continue. We have the opportunity to bring order to the sector and ensure fairness for debtors and bailiffs alike. Putting bailiff regulation on a statutory footing could save the taxpayer millions of pounds a year by easing the burden on the judiciary. It would immediately raise standards and protect our constituents in the most vulnerable moments of their lives, saving money and lives. I simply urge my hon. Friend the Minister to confirm today that the Government will consult on bailiff reform.

I thank the Money and Mental Health Policy Institute, the ECB, the Money Advice Trust and countless others for their thoughts ahead of the debate. I say a special thank you to StepChange: Vikki Brownridge, Richard Lane, Sophie Morris and hundreds of other StepChange staff do inspirational work to provide vital debt advice at some of the most difficult moments.

My hon. Friend the Minister has been a champion for victims of domestic abuse. Today we have learned of yet another grave injustice, which has remained in the shadows for far too long: the scandal of rogue bailiffs, who prey on some of the most vulnerable in our society. I hope that she and the Minister of State, Ministry of Justice, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Sarah Sackman), who I also deeply admire and respect, will stand with me in ensuring that justice is done in this area.

I came to this debate with one simple aim: for the Government to legislate to introduce an independent regulator for the enforcement sector. I hope that after hearing the points I have made today, the Minister will set out that they are considering doing exactly that.

11.13 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): Diolch, Mr Western. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) for securing this debate on a very important subject. The Government share his concern to ensure that the public are protected against inappropriate enforcement action, and the harrowing stories we have heard today demonstrate why that is so critical.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the way he powerfully and respectfully told the individual stories of first-hand experiences that had been entrusted to him, so that we heard them directly. They are so important to us as parliamentarians and legislators, and what we have heard about the scale of the issue should rightly shock us all. I also thank the organisations he mentioned, including StepChange, for the immeasurable and vital work they do to highlight the impact of debt enforcement on the most vulnerable in our society.

As my hon. Friend said, figures from the enforcement sector indicate that it is sent about 4 million court orders each year for enforcement using the taking control of goods procedure. Those debts and fines are owed to a wide range of parties, from private individuals and small businesses making individual court claims to local authorities, central Government and companies issuing large numbers of claims. The enforcement sector therefore plays an important role in supporting economic growth, funding public services and underpinning the rule of law.

However, the enforcement sector also has a significant impact on people's lives, as we have heard. As the Minister with responsibility for victims and for reducing violence against women and girls, I can only imagine how intimidating it would be for a vulnerable woman who might be home alone or with her children, to hear that knock, or a pounding on the door, from a bailiff. That woman, and everyone else in society, has the right to expect that laws and safeguards are in place to ensure their safety.

While the vast majority of enforcement agents comply with the law, sadly some do not, as we have heard in this debate, and we share the concern to ensure that appropriate safeguards are in place. For many years, successive Governments have sought to balance the need to ensure that vulnerable people are treated fairly with the need to ensure that creditors are able to enforce debts and fines, and this Government want to ensure that the right balance is found between those two competing objectives.

Back in 2007, the then Labour Government recognised that measures were needed to protect vulnerable people from aggressive enforcement action, and they created an ambitious new framework with the regulation of bailiffs in the Tribunals, Courts and Enforcement Act 2007. Those reforms, known as the taking control of goods reforms, were finally implemented in 2014. The 2014 reforms aimed to set out clearly and transparently the procedures that must be followed by enforcement agents when enforcing debts using the taking control of goods procedure.

Those reforms set out several safeguards to protect the public, and vulnerable people in particular. They aimed to disincentivise aggressive or unnecessary enforcement action, including introducing a compliance stage to give people an opportunity to pay without that visit being necessary, and to provide protection against inappropriate and threatening enforcement agent action. The reforms introduced a new court-based certification scheme for individual agents and, importantly, mandatory training to ensure that enforcement agents have the skills needed to carry out their job effectively. The Ministry of Justice review found that the reforms had brought some positive changes, including full transparency and consistency, but also that some enforcement agents were still perceived to be acting aggressively and, more importantly, that they were not complying with the new rules.

As a result of complaints being made about enforcement agents, the Justice Committee held an inquiry in 2019. In its final report, the Committee expressed surprise that enforcement agents appeared to be “under-regulated compared with other sectors.”

It recommended having a regulator with the ability to stop unfit enforcement agents and companies practising. The Committee also found the complaints system for bailiffs to be

“fragmented and hard to navigate, especially for vulnerable people”, and recommended that an independent complaints body be set up, to which all complaints and enforcement agents could be escalated.

In response to those findings, the enforcement sector worked with the debt advice sector and the Centre for Social Justice to create the Enforcement Conduct Board. Its mission is to ensure that all those facing enforcement action in England and Wales are treated fairly. As we have heard, the ECB is a voluntary independent oversight body. The enforcement sector has on the whole accepted its oversight, and the ECB demonstrated that it has a valuable role to play.

The ECB has established an accreditation scheme for firms, which 96% of the industry has signed up to voluntarily; it has published professional standards for agents and the companies that employ them and it is about to begin considering complaints made against enforcement companies. It is establishing an independent dataset about enforcement, for example, and recently commissioned a study of body-worn camera footage, which found that enforcement agents broke the rules in 6% of cases—but, as we have heard, that 6% is too many.

The ECB believes that legislation is needed to fulfil fully its mission as an independent body. My hon. Friend set out some of the arguments in favour of the Government legislating to set up a statutory independent

[Alex Davies-Jones]

regulator. The Government recognise that legislation could ensure a level playing field, guaranteeing that everyone facing enforcement action would be dealing with an enforcement agent and firm subject to the same standard, overseen by that independent body. It would also mean that everyone facing enforcement action would be able to complain to an independent body using that same procedure.

My hon. Friend has suggested a number of responsibilities and powers that a regulator could be given. We also welcome the debate on how Government can build on the excellent work that the ECB has already done with the sector on that voluntary basis to protect boards facing enforcement action.

I reassure the House that we are considering all the issues that have been raised today. We are also considering how best to engage with stakeholders to inform decisions about whether further legislation is necessary and, if so, what such legislation should in fact do. It is important that we consider all those issues carefully. On the one hand we know that when regulation is done well, it can protect the public and support economic growth and innovation; on the other hand, poorly designed regulation can fail to keep the public safe, stifle economic growth and prevent regulated bodies from adapting to emerging technologies and new challenges.

The Government are also considering our response to a consultation held by the previous Government on the reforms to the Taking Control of Goods Regulations 2013, which aimed to increase the proportion of cases that settle at the earliest and cheapest stages by, for example, giving people more time to access debt advice. We are also considering the findings of a report by the previous Government that recommended uplifting the fees that enforcement agents can recover under the 2013 regulations by 5%. We are still reviewing both those issues and will set out the way forward shortly.

The Government want to ensure that the enforcement sector operates fairly and effectively and, more importantly, is regulated properly. The experiences we have heard about today illustrate why it is so important that we absolutely get this right. As we move forward, we will continue to engage with Parliament and all relevant stakeholders to ensure that our approach is balanced and just, and that it takes into account the needs of the most vulnerable in our society. I extend that invitation to my hon. Friend and other hon. Members across the House to ensure that we hear a wide range of views and get everyone's input, which is important if we are to get this right—and we are determined to get this right.

Question put and agreed to.

11.21 am

Sitting suspended.

Carbon Monoxide Poisoning: Travel Advice

[DR ROSENA ALLIN-KHAN *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government advice on risks of carbon monoxide poisoning when travelling.

It is an honour to speak under your chairmanship today, Dr Allin-Khan. I also extend my gratitude to all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken the time to participate in today's debate. Their presence means so much to campaigners, to victims of carbon monoxide poisoning and their families, as well as to the charities and organisations that support them. I especially acknowledge my constituent, Cathy Foley, who first brought the issue of CO poisoning abroad to my attention during a surgery appointment in November last year. I will open the debate with Cathy's story, which she shared with me.

Hudson Foley, Cathy's son, was by all accounts a bright, enthusiastic and energetic young man. As for many people his age, physical health and fitness were a pursuit, a pastime and a pleasure, as was the lure of international travel. In May 2023, Hudson set off from his family home in Surrey for an organised backpacking adventure across South America, where he planned to learn Spanish, volunteer, meet new people and explore the region.

During his travels, Hudson stayed in home-stay accommodation, arranged by a well-known travel company specialising in youth travel. On the morning of Wednesday 30 October 2023, he had breakfast, made a phone call to the UK, and shared light-hearted conversations with his host's family, before heading for his morning shower. Only minutes later, Hudson was found unresponsive in the bathroom. Despite the best efforts of his host family, Hudson could not be revived. He was just 24 years old when he died.

The official cause of death was acute pulmonary oedema, a condition where excess fluid fills the lungs. That diagnosis made no sense to Cathy. Hudson was a healthy, active young man who neither smoked nor drank. Determined to uncover the truth of his death, Cathy reached out to the British embassy in Quito to request a post-mortem report. The first difficulty she faced was that obtaining the report required a formal request from a solicitor.

After months of persistence, even flying to Ecuador herself, Cathy finally received the report, which included a toxicology analysis from a US-based specialist doctor, whom Cathy had had to find to undertake the work. The results showed no alcohol or drug presence, but one alarming detail stood out: the carbon monoxide levels in Hudson's blood exceeded 50%. Had it not been for Cathy's relentless determination, including travelling to Ecuador, consulting a carbon monoxide specialist, securing legal assistance and hiring a translator, Hudson's death would have remained misdiagnosed and there would have been no inquest. In fact, Hudson's case was just days from being filed away for good.

Thanks to Cathy's tenacity, the true story behind Hudson's death is being heard today. One of the greatest challenges that Cathy and campaign groups face in their advocacy for carbon monoxide awareness is the lack of

accurate data on carbon monoxide-related deaths overseas. We know that fatalities have occurred over the past 25 years—

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (in the Chair): Order.

2.33 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

2.46 pm

On resuming—

Dr Pinkerton: As I was saying, one of the greatest challenges that Cathy and campaign groups face in their advocacy for carbon monoxide awareness is the lack of accurate data on carbon monoxide-related deaths overseas. We know that fatalities have occurred over the past 25 years in the likes of Spain, Egypt, France and Ecuador, with many more cases of travellers being hospitalised worldwide. The data remains fragmented, however, and it drastically under-records and under-represents the true scale of carbon monoxide deaths.

In many countries, post-mortem toxicology reports are not required, meaning that carbon monoxide often goes undetected and unrecorded. Ultimately, deaths caused by carbon monoxide may be attributed to generic pulmonary conditions, as happened with Hudson. The silent killer remains silent. The UK charity CO-Gas Safety has recorded 34 deaths of British citizens overseas by carbon monoxide poisoning since 1999, but it stresses that that is a vast under-recording. How many more have gone undocumented?

Many families lack the resources or ability to do what Cathy did, leaving them without the truth that they deserve. It is crucial to understand that the dangers of carbon monoxide extend far beyond sudden fatal poisoning. Since taking up this cause, I have met survivors who suffer from the long-term health implications, including severe cognitive impairments that affect memory, language, mood and behaviour, all of which are caused by prolonged CO exposure.

The risk is not limited to home stays such as the one Hudson was in when he died, nor is it confined to low-budget backpacker accommodation, as some might assume. In May 2022, three American tourists were found dead in their villas at the Sandals resort in the Bahamas, having all perished from the effects of carbon monoxide. Let me be clear: this can happen to anyone anywhere, at any age, in a luxury hotel or a backpacker hostel. Faults can develop even in well-maintained appliances, meaning that all travellers, regardless of where they stay, would be well advised to take precautions. The most heart-wrenching reality of this particular tragedy is that it was entirely preventable. If only Hudson had been aware of the high levels of carbon monoxide in his home stay—if only he had carried a £20 portable carbon monoxide alarm.

Since Hudson's death, Cathy and her family, who are here today, have dedicated themselves to raising awareness of the risks of CO poisoning through Hudson's Pack Safe appeal—a campaign that encourages travellers, particularly young backpackers, to carry and use a carbon monoxide alarm. Working in collaboration with the Safer Tourism Foundation, Cathy's campaign pushes for greater responsibility across the travel industry to

ensure that all accommodation providers, from chain hotels to Airbnb hosts, pay attention to carbon monoxide safety. Hudson's Pack Safe appeal has already made significant progress in educating about these potential dangers.

Through the sheer force of her character—I can attest to that force—Cathy has taken Hudson's message on to radio and television, and even into the match day programme at Chelsea football club, the team Hudson had supported all his life. It is fair to say that this debate would not be happening today had it not been for the constituency surgery I had with Cathy last November. That conversation opened my eyes to the devastating effect that carbon monoxide poisoning can have. Although I had heard of the odourless, colourless gas before and was aware of the “silent killer” label, I had no understanding of CO's deadly consequences, not just for travellers such as Hudson but for people in homes here in the UK.

That brings me to what I ask the Government to do on behalf of Hudson's family and all the campaign groups I have been working with, many of whom are in the Gallery. The root cause of these preventable deaths is the fact that travellers are simply unaware that the accommodation they are staying in could pose a potential carbon monoxide risk. They do not even realise that the danger exists. Although the risk of carbon monoxide is undoubtedly everywhere, even here in the UK, education about its risk is not at the same level as, say, education about the risk of fire. Unlike fire, people cannot see it, smell it or sense it. They would not even know if they were suffering from its effects. That is the fundamental issue.

Shockingly, many major travel companies, such as the one that Hudson used to organise his kit list for his trip to South America, are completely unaware of those risks. But there is a devastatingly simple way to put the risks of carbon monoxide poisoning on to the radar of the UK travel industry, and into the minds and plans of British people travelling overseas. The UK travel sector closely monitors and indexes itself against the travel advice provided by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. From school trips abroad to travel companies, the travel industry uses information from the gov.uk website and feeds it into corporate and institutional risk assessments and travel guides. I know, because I have done it myself when organising field trips and coursework overseas in the university sector.

The FCDO has a huge amount of influence in the UK travel sector, even if it does not always realise it, and the risks faced by travellers are clearly reflected in the travel advice and kit lists that the FCDO provides. In correspondence with me on 22 January, the Minister of State for Development stated that the British embassy in Quito had recently reviewed carbon monoxide poisoning incidents in Ecuador, and as a result had determined not to update travel advice to add the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning. Given Cathy's experience in securing an accurate post-mortem assessment in Hudson's case, the reliability of the data on which that assessment was made is certainly open to question.

Some may ask: why focus this debate on risk to travellers overseas? The answer is simple. Because carbon monoxide has no smell or taste, it is not an obvious danger, so it can happen anywhere in the world. Someone such as Hudson, who only felt faint in the days leading up to his death, would not necessarily have realised that

[Dr Pinkerton]

he was in any imminent danger. People instinctively flee when they see fire, but the same instinctive response does not apply to carbon monoxide poisoning.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this debate, which, as he said, is very important to Cathy and her family, some of whom have graced us with their presence this afternoon. Although this was a tragic loss of a young man in his prime, does the hon. Member agree that if other lives are saved because better precautions are taken, some good might yet come for others from the family's tragic bereavement?

Dr Pinkerton: I completely agree. Even though I do not speak for Cathy, I know that she would agree with that. The change that is required is devastatingly simple. It is a minor change that we are looking for. Just a few lines added to the Government travel advice could have a lifesaving impact of the kind that the right hon. Gentleman mentions. The FCDO has a real opportunity to influence the entire travel sector by identifying the risk of carbon monoxide on its travel advisory pages, from where it can cascade through the wider UK travel industry. I must confess I am not convinced that the FCDO fully appreciates or grasps the power and influence it has over that sector, or the close attention that individuals and institutions pay to its travel advisory pages.

Of course, advice can go only so far. If travellers are warned of the risks of carbon monoxide, it becomes their individual responsibility to pack a portable carbon monoxide alarm and use it while travelling. That link is often broken. We hope that today the FCDO can see a way to use its power to reduce risk and possibly prevent further tragic losses of British lives overseas. Hudson Foley's death was not an isolated incident, but Cathy's extraordinary determination has ensured that his story has been heard today. I urge the Government to move beyond the mindset that more numerical evidence is needed before action is taken. I contend that we cannot afford to wait for more deaths before reacting; we must act now.

2.55 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Allin-Khan. I am not sure if this is the first time that you have chaired Westminster Hall, but if it is, I wish you well. I am sure that there will be many more opportunities to chair and to keep us all in place—thank you for being here.

I thank the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) for leading this debate on an important issue. He delivered a difficult story in a compassionate way on behalf of his constituents. I have only known him a short time in this House, but this is the man I know. We all convey our deepest sympathy to those who grieve for a loved one.

Being confronted with the stark reality of the loss of a life while backpacking, when everything is about fun and enjoyment, is quite inconceivable. There is nothing more valuable than life, and that is an awful thing to happen abroad. It is therefore important to suggest some ideas for addressing the issue, as the hon. Gentleman has done. The Minister always tries to respond in a positive way, and that gives us all—especially the hon.

Gentleman and his constituents, and those who are here in the Gallery—hope that some good can come out of this tragedy.

Many will know that carbon monoxide is a silent killer, because it is colourless and odourless. It is known across the USA and Europe as the leading cause of fatal poisoning. Although up-to-date figures are not available, between July 2010 and June 2011 Northern Ireland suffered seven deaths and four casualties from CO poisoning. Furthermore, Northern Ireland has been identified as having the highest rate of fatalities from CO poisoning in the UK. The hon. Member for Surrey Heath looked overseas, but by reflecting on what happens back home we get an idea of the prevalence of such poisoning. That highlights a massive need for greater integration between this Government and the Northern Ireland Assembly. I am ever mindful that that is not the Minister's responsibility, but, through his civil servants, can he give us some idea whether any discussions will be ongoing, in view of the fact that we have the highest figures in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

The FCDO provides guidance and support for British nationals who live or go abroad, outlining the type of help that it can provide and offering general advice on staying safe overseas. Whenever someone sets out on a fun journey overseas—for many, it may be the trip of a lifetime—it is important to have up-to-date travel advice and warnings for specific countries. The hon. Member for Surrey Heath has outlined that well for us all. The issue is that the UK has guidance only for our own country, meaning that for some destinations abroad there is no legal requirement for detectors in hostels and Airbnbs. We should be pushing for that, and the hon. Gentleman has done so forcibly in this debate, as we would all expect.

It is crucial that people are aware of the first signs of carbon monoxide exposure, because it is so hard to detect. Exposure to small amounts of carbon monoxide for a long time may not necessarily be fatal. It can cause flu-like symptoms, such as tiredness and headaches, memory problems and loss of vision. It can be difficult to compare, as those symptoms are common alongside other day-to-day illnesses. Someone might be under the illusion that the situation is not as bad as it was, or as it could be—hence the importance of a detector. The UK charity, CO-Gas Safety, has recorded the deaths of 34 UK citizens abroad, as the hon. Member for Surrey Heath referred to, though it says the number could be even higher. That is worrying, if such a figure just scrapes at the surface.

Currently, despite carbon monoxide posing a massive risk to people of all ages, only two of the Government's travel safety information pages, for China and Nepal, address carbon monoxide poisoning. That might be an indication for anyone travelling to those places for a holiday of a lifetime—I would hardly be going to China, but that is by the way, and Nepal could be one of those countries people might go to. The most recent advice to British travellers highly advocates carrying a mobile carbon monoxide alarm. Some people might ask how much they have to carry, but it is light and small, does not take up much room and could save lives. That is what this debate is all about.

In addition, standards for the design and manufacture of combustion appliances can be far lower outside Europe. Appliances used in makeshift holiday lets can

be old and installed in rooms ill-suited to their use. Travellers should be aware of the risks and take precautions to protect themselves. That is not a criticism of places where people stay; to be honest, when I have been abroad, I have stayed in some really bad places, but that did not bother me. Ultimately, I was not worried—I was there because they were cheap. That was when I was younger and much healthier.

Precautions are a small price to pay to protect life, but I believe the Government must do more to persuade other countries to be compliant and protect their people. Figures show that 95% of households across the UK have smoke alarms. Why do only 4% have carbon monoxide alarms, when the potential dangers are just as fatal? There are things for us to do at home that cannot be ignored. There is more work to be done, not only abroad but domestically to protect our people, which we have a duty to do.

I look to the Government and the Minister for direction and plans to raise more awareness, to have a strategy and plan of action that we can point to as a result of today's debate. The stories we have heard of lost lives are awful. International counterparts, along with our own Government, have a role to play to ensure safety for those travelling. I look forward to hearing what the Minister says. I hope he will tell us that we can do more to protect people in future. To the hon. Member for Surrey Heath, who set the scene, I say well done.

3.2 pm

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Allin-Khan. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) for securing this vital debate, and for the powerful and deeply moving speech he made.

The story of Hudson Foley, a young man with his whole life ahead of him, tragically lost due to carbon monoxide poisoning while travelling, is one that should never have to be told. Yet, tragically, Hudson's story is not an isolated case. There have been too many lives lost, too many families shattered, and the Government response is sadly inadequate. As we have discussed, carbon monoxide is an invisible killer: odourless, colourless and impossible to detect without proper equipment. It is produced when fuels such as gas, oil, paraffin, charcoal or wood do not burn properly, which makes it a hidden danger in many settings. Homes, hotels and holiday rentals are all susceptible.

Without adequate warning, education and safety measures, travellers are left vulnerable to risks they do not even know exist. As we have heard, the statistics are sobering. There were 28,900 deaths worldwide in 2021 alone. This issue does not affect only one country or demographic; it is a global problem and demands urgent action. The heartbreaking reality is that those deaths are preventable. My hon. Friend rightly made the point that portable carbon monoxide alarms can dramatically reduce the risk, yet far too few travellers are aware of their importance.

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has a clear and pressing duty to act to protect not just British travellers, but their loved ones. It is failing to provide strong, explicit warnings about the dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning in its travel advice, and that must be addressed. British travellers trust FCDO

guidance; it is widely used by individuals, families and the travel industry itself, and yet nowhere does it mention the very real risk of carbon monoxide poisoning. That must change.

The Liberal Democrats call on the Government to take the following steps immediately: update country-specific travel advice to include warnings about carbon monoxide poisoning risks; amend the guidance and foreign travel checklist pages to provide clear advice on CO safety; actively encourage travellers to carry portable carbon monoxide alarms and launch a public information campaign to ensure that travellers are aware of the risks and how to protect themselves. Those are incredibly simple, easily achievable measures that would save lives.

The loss of life that we have heard about today is not due to chance. It is a result of a failure to prioritise public health and safety. Under the last Conservative Government, the public health grant was cut by 26%, undermining crucial initiatives that could have helped prevent those tragedies. Let us be clear: every death from carbon monoxide poisoning is one too many. We have the tools to stop them happening and the Government should act. The case of Hudson Foley highlights how devastating inaction can be.

I must praise the dedication of Hudson's family. It was only because of their persistence that his cause of death was confirmed—something that would have otherwise gone unnoticed, as many countries do not require a post-mortem toxicology report for suspected CO poisoning. I hope the Government will recognise that an appropriate tribute to his life and to the hard work of his family would be to adopt our proposals and prevent future deaths from happening.

We should not just stop at protecting travellers. We also need urgent action to ensure that people are safe in their own homes. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) highlighted cases in Northern Ireland. The recent tragedy in Swanage, Dorset, where three elderly people lost their lives, likely due to CO poisoning, has exposed serious gaps in our domestic regulations. Unlike in Scotland, care homes in England are exempt from CO alarm regulations—an appalling oversight. Vulnerable residents deserve protection, and the Liberal Democrats call on the Government to close that loophole immediately.

The issue also highlights broader failures in public health policy. The Liberal Democrats have long campaigned for an increase in the public health grant, ensuring that funding is allocated to address the worst health inequalities, including those linked to CO exposure. We should also push for greater awareness in travel literature, as outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath, and urge travel agencies and tour operators to include carbon monoxide safety advice as standard practice.

Finally, I want to pay tribute to Cathy Foley, Hudson's mother, and the incredible work she has done through Hudson's Pack Safe appeal. Her campaign, in partnership with the Safer Tourism Foundation, has documented cases of carbon monoxide poisoning deaths across a wide range of accommodations worldwide, from major hotel chains to short-term rentals such as Airbnb. Cathy's advocacy, alongside the cross-party support of the all-party parliamentary carbon monoxide group, demonstrates how much change is needed. I am deeply grateful to

[Edward Morello]

Cathy and her family for their work and for being here today to share their story—one that no parent should ever have to tell.

I do not think this should be a political issue. *The Lancet* has described carbon monoxide poisoning as an almost entirely preventable cause of death. There can be no justification for continued inaction. We owe it to Hudson and to his family, and to all those who have lost loved ones to this silent killer. By making simple, practical changes, we can save lives. I ask the Government to seize the opportunity to do so.

3.8 pm

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): Thank you, Dr Allin-Khan, for calling me to respond on behalf of His Majesty's Opposition. It is a pleasure to serve under you for the first time. I commend the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) for raising this issue on the Floor of the House today. It is an issue that most MPs never hear about and never think about. The public do not know about this issue, and he has done us all a huge service today by raising this topic and allowing us to hear about what happened in the tragic case of Hudson, who died in 2023 at the age of only 24 in Ecuador, and how carbon monoxide poisoning could happen to anybody. It is not just something that has happened once; it can happen over and over again, and we need cross-party action to deal with it. I know that the Minister will take on board all the points raised by hon. Members to ensure that we do not close down this debate and move on to other issues, but that we make the necessary changes to protect the safety of British travellers abroad.

Furthermore, as the hon. Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello) said, there are risks domestically in the United Kingdom. A large number of people also die from carbon monoxide poisoning in the UK, a possibility unbeknown to most people. The debate has triggered something in my mind; many years ago, I had constituents who died in a similar situation, and it probably happens more often than we realise. Action is needed, and I hope that the Minister will trigger Government action to ensure that Hudson's tragic death was not in vain and that others will live because of what happened to him. We must learn the lessons from that tragedy.

I again commend the hon. Member for Surrey Heath for raising this issue. I also thank other hon. Members who have made powerful contributions, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois)—I had the pleasure of visiting his constituency only last Friday. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke powerfully about the effects of this issue in Northern Ireland, and I have already mentioned the hon. Member for West Dorset. I feel that there is cross-party consensus in the room that action is needed. I thank Hudson's family and friends who have come here today. They have our heartfelt sympathy for their tragic loss, and we hope that today will be the start of a serious change that will save lives in the future.

I will make some formal remarks on behalf of His Majesty's Opposition. We know that carbon monoxide poisoning is often misdiagnosed—or, worse, not diagnosed at all—and the number of deaths from that awful

occurrence could be far greater than we know. Many deaths abroad do not even appear in national or international statistics, and we do not know for sure how many people die from this awful situation. Most post-mortem tests are not fully conducted, or not conducted at all. Do the Government have any estimate for how many Britons have died from carbon monoxide poisoning overseas in recent years? Are those statistics available—and if not, why not? Perhaps the Minister could tell us that in his closing remarks.

According to the all-party carbon monoxide group, 40 people die and thousands are injured every year in the UK from carbon monoxide poisoning. If that is happening in this country, with relatively strong gas safety regulations, what about the domestic risks to people living in our own country, as well as to holidaymakers and those staying in properties with unknown safety standards abroad? That certainly applied in the case of Hudson in a home stay, which I imagine involves far greater risks than staying in hotel accommodation. As we heard from the hon. Member for Surrey Heath, carbon monoxide can affect anyone. If, for £20, we can know that the place we are residing in is safe, I think that is worth the investment. We need all travellers to take that sound advice.

Have the Government evaluated how the risks compare for British people travelling to countries with different safety standards? Standards are not the same all over the world. Having been to Quito, I am sure that Ecuador is an example of that; it is a very different part of the world and standards differ. It is important that people understand, when they go to far-away destinations, what risks are prevalent. We need to make people aware of such risks before they travel. Will the Minister look at this issue and let us know his findings?

Travellers booking through travel agencies may receive safety information, but that does not necessarily apply to those arranging trips independently. What more can the Government do to ensure that all British travellers, regardless of how they book their accommodation, are aware of the risks involved? The FCDO's travel advice is widely used and trusted. Would it not be logical to expand the inclusion of advice on carbon monoxide poisoning to all destinations with inadequate gas safety regulations, rather than to a handful of countries where tragic deaths have occurred?

Portable carbon monoxide alarms, as has been mentioned, are inexpensive, easy to pack and widely recommended by the experts. Surely the Government should be encouraging their use in the same way that they promote other basic travel safety measures. We have seen how determined campaigners are working to raise awareness of that fact, including Cathy Foley and her family through the Hudson's Pack Safe appeal. The Government should move quickly on the work that is being done now to promote this serious risk and state clearly what can be done.

The Safer Tourism Foundation and the all-party carbon monoxide group have made constructive recommendations to improve public understanding. How are the Government working with those organisations to strengthen their approach, and what discussions have the Government had with travel industry representatives, including airlines, tour operators and accommodation providers, to explore ways to improve safety messaging for holidaymakers across the world? It is not about

creating unnecessary alarm, but about ensuring that British travellers have the knowledge they need to make informed decisions about their safety. We already provide advice on issues ranging from food hygiene to local crime risks, so is it not sensible to have the same kind of advice for treating the potential for carbon monoxide poisoning and to treat it with the same level of seriousness as we do other possible risks to travellers abroad?

This is a conversation about simple, practical steps that can and will save lives. I hope the Minister will take the opportunity to outline what action the Government will take to help keep British travellers safe. I again thank the hon. Member for Surrey Heath and all Members who have contributed to the debate. I particularly thank Hudson's family. Let us leave today in the knowledge that the debate has changed history, and that, from now on, the British people will know, and the Government will advise them, that they must take the adequate precautions that could save their lives and those of their loved ones.

3.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Allin-Khan, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton) for securing the debate. I send my condolences to Cathy and to the whole family for the tragic loss of Hudson in Ecuador. I know how difficult it must be, and my thoughts are with them. I am grateful, too, for the contributions of other hon. Members, and I shall try to respond to the points that have been made. I know that some of those contributions are informed by personal and painful experience.

I am the Minister with consular responsibilities for British nationals overseas, so I hope hon. Members will forgive me if my speech focuses on the overseas elements of the debate. We have taken careful note of the points made for other Departments, including the Northern Ireland Office, the Department of Health and Social Care and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. My officials will seek answers for hon. Members on the more detailed questions that I am unable to answer today.

Supporting British nationals abroad is clearly a key priority for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Most British people live or travel abroad without incident or needing to seek consular assistance. When an incident does occur, they naturally and understandably ask whether it was preventable. If it was not, what might have made it more bearable?

Let me say a few words on how the Government are acting to help British nationals in need abroad. I will begin by setting out our approach to travel advice, the goal of which is to help British nationals to make better informed decisions about international travel. Their safety is always our top priority, and our advice is based on objective assessments of the risks, based on inputs from multiple sources. That includes our own embassies, foreign Governments, and, where relevant, intelligence services.

On carbon monoxide poisoning specifically, as the House will be aware, building, fire and gas safety standards abroad do not always match those in the UK, as the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) identified.

Since the Foreign Office lacks in-house expertise on building safety, we share information from expert organisations, such as Energy UK, in some of our travel advice. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, for some countries, such as China and Nepal, where carbon monoxide poisoning is a higher risk, we include specific information on that in our travel advice, based on local reports and consular case trends.

I recognise the questions asked by the hon. Member for Romford about trends; it is difficult to determine those on the basis of the information available to the Foreign Office. Last year, sadly, 4,000 British nationals lost their lives overseas, and we believe that at least two of those were as a consequence of carbon monoxide poisoning. However, as many hon. Members have identified, we cannot be sure of what we do not know. Wherever cases are raised, as with the tragic case raised by the hon. Member for Surrey Heath, my officials and I are available. If there is uncertainty about the cause of death and further support is required from the Foreign Office, we stand available to provide that. But as I think the hon. Member identified, ultimately, our advice is there to guide people, not to set rules that people must abide by. It is intended as just one source of information to help British people to make informed decisions about where and how they travel.

I acknowledge what the hon. Member for Surrey Heath said about the impact of our advice. I assure the House that we always consider the arguments for changes to travel advice on their merits. We must make judgments, try to consider all risks proportionately, and consider the best way to ensure that advice is presented to travellers.

Mr Francois: On the point about the extent of guidance, with my recent gas bill, I got a leaflet from British Gas—which I take to be authoritative—warning about the dangers of carbon monoxide poisoning. It estimated that about 50 people had died from it in the UK in the previous year. That is slightly higher than but similar to the APPG's estimate. British Gas is warning people here in the UK. Given what has happened, it would not be a great deal of skin off the Minister's nose if we were able to say that the Government will make including that a standard part of travel advice for Brits going abroad. Can I invite him, with the family here, to do the right thing?

Mr Falconer: I think the right hon. Gentleman's proposal is that we include the risks from carbon monoxide everywhere in the world. I am happy to take away that proposal and to come back with a more detailed answer, particularly in relation to the letter from the hon. Member for Surrey Heath, in which he set out some further requests of the Foreign Office, as he did in his speech. With travel advice, we always balance the desire not to have too much standard text across all countries with the wish to keep it as focused as possible, but I am happy to take away that question and return to it.

Alongside travel advice, of course, the Government aim to reduce incidents through our long-standing Travel Aware campaign, which includes key messages such as encouraging British nationals to have appropriate travel insurance, to read our travel advice and to sign up for our alerts. We partner with more than 100 organisations from across the travel industry, including airlines, tour

[Mr Falconer]

operators and insurance providers, and we ask them to help to amplify our key messages and drive customers to our travel advice pages.

We try to regularly review our work with partners to ensure that they highlight appropriate issues to British travellers. That has included work with the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents and the Safer Tourism Foundation, which I think the hon. Member for Surrey Heath has mentioned already, to raise awareness specifically on the risks of carbon monoxide poisoning around the world. I commit that my officials will hold another meeting with the Safer Tourism Foundation later this month to explore opportunities for greater collaboration.

Turning now to our work on prevention, we use a range of sources—customer feedback, casework data and in-house research—to determine when to take preventive action. We also work closely with host authorities, partners in the travel industry and others to improve local support for British people abroad. Through our student brand ambassador programme, we aim to raise awareness among young people of preventable incidents.

Let me assure the House that the Government are committed to continual improvement. We are looking for ways to improve our consular services, including our prevention activity, messaging and travel advice. Priority themes are constantly under review, with decisions being made according to what poses the greatest risk to British travellers abroad. We will also explore options for linking to other expert sources through our travel advice pages for solo and independent travellers. That includes advice such as that shared by the Safer Tourism Foundation on carbon monoxide safety.

I admire the efforts of the Foley family to urge travellers to take safety equipment such as carbon monoxide detectors on their travels. We will consider including that in our advice, and it is of course important that travellers use them in accordance with manufacturers' instructions and that they should be maintained and tested regularly.

I emphasise that we welcome all feedback and use it to improve our services. I recognise the strength of feeling from the House and from the hon. Member for Surrey Heath. We will consider his proposals carefully, and I am happy to meet with colleagues again to follow

up on these important issues. In the spirit of the speech from the hon. Member for Romford, we intend to work on this on a cross-party basis. I reiterate the Foreign Office's commitment to providing clear, accessible and up-to-date travel advice. We will keep it under constant review and ensure it reflects the latest assessments. We will continue to collaborate with the travel industry to amplify personal safety messages, and we will work with host Governments to reduce the risks for British people abroad.

3.26 pm

Dr Pinkerton: I extend my thanks again to all hon. and right hon. Members who have come to this debate; they have spoken passionately, supportively and constructively. I think we all recognise that what is being asked for is a comparatively small change: the addition of some extra lines on some web pages. However, those extra lines could have a transformative effect, because of the power of the FCDO website in setting a tone among UK tourism organisations and the wider UK travel and tourism sector. The way that risk assessments and other institutional documentation are indexed against the travel advice provided by the FCDO mean that such a small change could have a transformative effect. An explicit recommendation to carry an incredibly cheap, incredibly portable and hugely effective CO alarm could genuinely save lives in the future.

I am hugely grateful to all who attended the debate. I want, one final time, to pay tribute to Cathy Foley and her family, along with the representatives of charities and organisations who are in the Gallery. They have supported Cathy, and they bring awareness to us all of the issue of carbon monoxide poisoning. I am hugely grateful to them all. I thank the Minister for committing to look again at that travel advice. I am encouraged to hear about the forthcoming meeting with the Safer Tourism Foundation, and I would be happy to be part of any future discussions.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government advice on risks of carbon monoxide poisoning when travelling.

3.28 pm

Sitting suspended.

Youth Provision: Universal and Targeted Support

4 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (in the Chair): I will call Harpreet Uppal 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. There will be no other speeches, but Members can intervene briefly.

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): I beg to move,
That this House has considered access to universal and targeted youth provision.

It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Dr Allin-Khan, and a pleasure to open this important debate on access to universal and targeted youth provision. It is fantastic to see so many Members here—I should have gone for a 90-minute debate after all!

I am grateful for the opportunity to highlight the vital role that youth services play in supporting young people across the country and delivering on the Government's mission to reduce barriers to opportunity. I know that many colleagues share my deep commitment to ensuring that every young person in our constituencies has the support and opportunities they need to thrive. Members from across the House recognise that youth services are not a luxury, but an essential part of our communities.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing this issue forward for a debate. It is obvious that if she had applied for a 90-minute debate, or even a three-hour debate, she would have got a good crowd for it. One feature in my constituency—I am sure that it is the same in hers—is church-based organisations. Churches remain the largest non-governmental institutions across Northern Ireland, and the largest organisations with voluntary membership. They provide the uniformed organisations, the youth clubs, the drama classes, the choirs and so much more. Does she agree that there is an opportunity for the Government and for the Minister's Department to work alongside church groups—all church groups, that is—to provide the help for the youth that we all wish to see?

Harpreet Uppal: The hon. Member is absolutely right that faith organisations and voluntary organisations play a huge part in the youth services that we deliver.

Trained youth workers create trusted relationships, offering safe spaces where young people can explore their interests, develop a sense of identity and, importantly, feel supported. Youth provision is also about giving young people the tools to lead happy, healthy and productive lives.

I want to recognise the steps that the Government have taken in this area. Initiatives such as the national youth strategy for England and the young futures hubs aim to bring together targeted support for young people, and they reflect a growing understanding of the importance of youth services. However, we must also be honest about the challenges we face.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Allin-Khan. May I just say how wonderful this debate is? I very much appreciate my hon. Friend's work in securing it. I also commend

the work of the voluntary sector, of local authorities, and of church groups and other faith communities. In particular, they provide much-needed targeted support on very difficult issues such as mental health. That is much appreciated in many communities across the country.

Harpreet Uppal: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct, and I will come on to mental health.

Fourteen years of Conservative Governments have resulted in a £1.2 billion real-terms reduction in local authority spending on youth services in England since 2010.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for securing this really important debate. She is making a powerful introduction. The Street Foyer YMCA in my constituency provides excellent support for a lot of young people, many of whom come from challenging backgrounds and circumstances, but the local authority faces severe financial difficulties. Somerset council can spend only £13.47 per head on young people in Somerset. Does the hon. Member agree that it is crucial that we address the broken local government funding model if we are to improve youth service provision?

Harpreet Uppal: I thank the hon. Member for her point. I am sure the Minister heard what she said.

Kirklees council, which covers my constituency of Huddersfield, has seen a 70% decrease in funding in the 14 years that I mentioned. That leaves just £47.76 per young person spent on youth services in our community.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this really important debate. In Stoke-on-Trent, the amount spent per young person is £10.76, but in inner London it is £110—10 times more. Does she agree that we need to look at the regional inequalities in how these services are funded? Hopefully, the Minister will hear that point too.

Harpreet Uppal: I am sure the Minister has heard my hon. Friend's point.

The Children's Society's "Good Childhood Report" shows that 15-year-olds in the UK have the lowest life satisfaction of young people across 27 European countries, based on programme for international student assessment data from 2022. Despite the financial outlook, there are many incredible organisations working in my constituency to support our young people, including Positive Stepz, Conscious Youth, Central Stars youth club, Team KickStart, Yorkshire Community Development, Empower, Boxpower and Temple Well-Being.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Everyone wants to intervene, and she is being very generous with her time. As she mentioned a few important local organisations, I want to do the same for my constituency. The redevelopment of Highgate Newtown community centre is an example of how an ambitious community space can serve as a welcoming hub that children and families look forward to visiting, and I thank Andrew Sanalitro and his team for making that happen. Does my hon. Friend agree that housing developers should not just retain community centres, but enhance them, in order to make provision for young people and families in our constituencies?

Harpreet Uppal: I agree with my hon. Friend, who has been a great champion in this area.

Such organisations deliver outstanding community-led services to our young people and offer them experiences, opportunities and environments that allow them to thrive. However, despite the best efforts of the incredible staff and volunteers, financial constraints have resulted in many having to reduce the services they offer. The evidence is clear: when youth services are cut, young people suffer.

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): Does the hon. Lady agree that the Minister should answer two questions? The first is about the funding and jobs that will flow from the national youth strategy, and the second is about integration. We need a youth chapter in the housing strategy, as Centrepoin has asked for, and to bring its co-production values into the “Get Britain Working” strategy, aspects of which are quite worrying.

Harpreet Uppal: I am sure the Minister has heard what the hon. Lady has said. I am proud that the Government are developing a national youth strategy, which has not happened before.

Research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that the closure of youth clubs led to a 4% drop in GCSE performance at age 16, with even greater effects on pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Worse still, the loss of youth services has been linked to a 14% increase in youth crime within six years of youth services closures.

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab) *rose*—

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD) *rose*—

Harpreet Uppal: I will take both interventions, but then I need to make a bit of progress before I take interventions from other Members.

Jas Athwal: I am pleased that my hon. Friend has secured this debate. Last week, I spoke about the importance of a holistic approach to preventing crime, and especially of providing young people with safe spaces. We have had 14 years of brutal cuts. The council I used to lead had a £1 billion budget, but now it is £800 million—£200 million has been cut from it. Despite those punishing cuts, it is still building the first lido to be built in London in decades, a swimming pool and a leisure centre. We must build infrastructure. Does my hon. Friend agree that the phrase “If you build it, they will come” should be at the forefront of everything we do?

Harpreet Uppal: I do agree. I will now take the intervention from the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire).

Helen Maguire: The 2020 investigation by the all-party parliamentary group on knife crime and violence reduction found a strong negative association between the closure of youth centres and increases in local knife crime. Every year, youth services save the public purse £500 million by preventing crime. In Surrey, spending has fallen by 49% since 2010, so does the hon. Member agree that investment in youth services is invaluable in preventing both knife crime and antisocial behaviour?

Harpreet Uppal: The hon. Member is quite right, and I am coming to that point now.

Unfortunately, we are seeing the consequences of reductions in youth service provision across the country, as organised criminal gangs lure children and young people into county lines networks and organised criminality. Too many communities have seen children criminally exploited and, sadly, we have seen the devastating consequences of knife crime. In Huddersfield, 15-year-old Khayri Mclean and 17-year-old Harley Brown sadly lost their lives to knife crime in recent years, and only last week, 15-year-old Harvey Willgoose was fatally stabbed in Sheffield. Knife crime leaves too many parents dealing with consequences that no parent should have to face, communities broken, and too many children and young people left with mental scars.

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): Thank you for chairing the debate, Dr Allin-Khan—it is good to see a fellow Khan in the Chair. My hon. Friend is making excellent progress on such an important subject. Across the country, children are being let down by the absence of support tailored to their multi-layered and complex needs. Does she agree that, in order to protect the mental wellbeing of young people, it is necessary to invest in good-quality, trauma-informed youth provision for all, and that the Minister should be looking at the regional inequalities that we can all see?

Harpreet Uppal: I agree with my hon. Friend. I will make a bit of progress before taking more interventions.

More than one in five children now have a diagnosable mental health condition, and many wait over a year to access a mental health specialist, with nearly 40,000 children waiting more than two years in 2023-24. Research shows that it is 100 times cheaper to treat a young person in the community than as an in-patient. The Government have taken steps to improve mental health support in schools, but youth services play a critical role in addressing these challenges early on. While I recognise all the work that this Government have already done to address these issues, the challenges facing the sector require more than short-term funding. The youth investment fund, for example, is helping to develop youth facilities, but it largely covers capital investment, leaving critical gaps in operational funding for staffing and programme delivery.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for her excellent speech. I totally agree that we need investment in capital as well as revenue funding. I recently brought together young people and youth organisations in Norwich to discuss the challenges they face, and there was a particular gap in the period between 3 pm and 7 pm. Does my hon. Friend agree that, when we are developing these strategies, we must make sure that the voices of those on the ground, particularly young people, are at the forefront?

Harpreet Uppal: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We must make sure that young people play a part in the programmes that are delivered for them.

While 22 young futures hubs are being piloted through the shared outcomes fund, they are only funded for one year. To recover from years of Conservative neglect, youth services need sustainable, long-term funding.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Allin-Khan. Does my hon. Friend agree that, to ensure adequate provision for youth services, we need to consider creating a statutory youth service with ringfenced funding? That would ensure that young people across the country are able to access high-quality services irrespective of the financial position of the local council. Often, when cuts are made to youth services, they cannot do that.

Harpreet Uppal: I agree with my hon. Friend that we need more investment in youth services, and I am sure the Minister has heard the point about statutory provision.

I know from recent meetings with incredible organisations working in this space that the young futures hubs pilot is hugely welcomed, and they would appreciate confirmation from the Minister of the timeline for delivery of the hubs. In addition, the Duke of Edinburgh's award team are calling for a universal enrichment guarantee that offers 80 hours of enrichment activity per year, giving all young people regular access to positive activities. I hope the Minister will look into that new policy from the Duke of Edinburgh's award team.

The benefits of investing in youth services are clear. As the Labour party manifesto said, "nothing says more about the state of a nation than the wellbeing of its children."

Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate. In Birmingham Erdington, we have a high proportion of young people with poor access to youth services and shockingly high youth knife crime statistics. Does she agree that the youth funding crisis must be urgently resolved?

Harpreet Uppal: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, and I hope we can work together on that issue in the future.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): It is obviously a pleasure to follow my near neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Erdington (Paulette Hamilton). Politics is about choices, and it is no surprise that not a single Conservative Back Bencher is here to listen or contribute to the debate. With that in mind, will my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield join me in calling on Conservative-run Staffordshire county council to pull its finger out and make sure that young constituents in Newcastle-under-Lyme, Kidsgrove and across the county get the youth services they need and deserve?

Harpreet Uppal: I support my hon. Friend's call, and it is disappointing that we do not have any Members from the official Opposition present.

Research shows that, for every £1 invested in youth work, the return to the taxpayer is between £3.20 and £6.40. Additionally, for every £1 invested in child and adolescent mental health services, the return on investment is an estimated £2.85 in benefits to the individual and an additional £1.40 in savings to the Government.

Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): If anyone does not get to intervene today, I would ask them to please sign up to my Backbench Business debate on youth services, because we need more time to discuss this matter.

As my hon. Friend rightly points out, supporting youth services is not just a moral case, but a financial one. Does she agree that the 73% decline in youth services points to the fact that we need to give them statutory protection and to have benchmarks for provision?

Harpreet Uppal: I do agree that we need more protections, and I am sure the Minister has heard my hon. Friend's point about statutory protection. I, too, urge hon. Members to sign up to my hon. Friend's application for a Backbench Business debate.

As hon. Members have said, providing youth services reduces the need later in life for more costly interventions, from social care to the criminal justice system. It also means that we give young people an opportunity to thrive.

A thriving youth sector depends on a strongly skilled workforce, so we need to ensure that the youth sector can attract, train and retain skilled professionals. The National Youth Agency's 2024 workforce survey found that more than 4,500 youth workers have left the profession in the past decade, and only six undergraduate youth work programmes remain, down from 37 in 2013. At the same time, the demand for youth services is constantly increasing, with 82% of youth sector organisations reporting growing demand for mental health support.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): DrMz, a youth organisation in Caerfyrddin, provides a safe space for diverse young people. The young farmers' clubs also provide life skills that are used in public office, including public speaking, the arts and chairing meetings, for young people in our rural communities. Children's services are devolved in Wales, but all those things are supported by our local authority. Does the hon. Member agree that adequate local authority funding is essential to safeguard these services for all our young people?

Harpreet Uppal: Yes, I do agree.

If we want the young futures hubs and other youth initiatives to succeed, we need to invest in training and development for youth workers. I urge the Government to consider a national training programme for youth workers to ensure that we have safe, effective and impactful youth provision. Good youth services change lives. Over the past months, I have met and heard stories from national organisations, and I have seen at first hand the incredible work done on the ground in Huddersfield. All of that highlights the transformative effects of providing young people with safe spaces, trusted relationships and pathways to brighter futures.

I know from first-hand experience that when young people are given the right support, they go on to achieve their potential, contribute to their communities and lead happier, healthier lives. Unfortunately, too many times I have seen talent squandered. We must ensure that every young person, no matter where they live, has access to high-quality youth services. The evidence is clear: investment in youth work is an investment in the future of our young people and our country. If we want to meet our growth ambitions, that also means investing in our young people.

I thank hon. Members for intervening, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister how we can work together to restart and strengthen youth provision across the country.

4.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship for the first time, Dr Allin-Khan. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal) on securing this important debate. It is brilliant to see so many Members from across the House, which reflects how important this issue is to Members. Slightly unusually, because this is only a 30-minute debate, not a 90-minute debate, I will respond to some of the points made in interventions. If I cannot respond to them all, or I cannot take all Members' interventions, I will of course write to hon. Members.

My hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams) and for Manchester Rusholme (Afzal Khan) raised important points about regional inequalities. As a constituency MP in South Yorkshire, I have of course seen that in my own area of Barnsley. We are looking at a pilot of a local youth transformation project, which could look at areas where local authority funding has fallen away, and we will of course take regional inequalities into account.

Rightly, the issue of mental health was raised, and I will touch on it in my speech. Evidence shows that youth services of course have a positive impact, and my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield spoke powerfully about that. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is no longer in his place, spoke about faith groups, and we are working with them in programmes such as Uniformed Youth. The hon. Member for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry) had specific questions, and I will touch on them in my speech, but I will also write to her if I do not answer them fully. I want to say from the outset that we want a more co-ordinated cross-Government approach, which, again, is something I would like to touch on.

There were specific questions about the Duke of Edinburgh scheme, and I will write to my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield about that. She also rightly and powerfully referenced the devastating impact of knife crime, and I send my and the Government's condolences to the family of Harvey, who was tragically killed in Sheffield last week.

I want now to address some of the substantial points, and I will write to hon. Members if I cannot take all their interventions. In the short time I have, I want to start my response by outlining that the Government recognise the transformative role that youth services play in young people's lives. We know that being part of a supportive community and having access to positive activities can improve a young person's wellbeing, health and personal development. We also know that youth workers and volunteers are vital to these services, building trusting relationships, creating safe spaces and, where needed, providing life-changing, targeted support. We have strong evidence of the impact of trusted adults in youth clubs, sports clubs, early support hubs, jobcentres and even in A&E.

We also know that the workforce situation is fragile. Local authority spending on youth has reduced by 73% since 2010. That equates to over £1 billion less being spent on young people each year. Sustainable jobs are becoming a rarity, and co-ordination of support has been lost. Now more than ever we need a thriving youth sector staffed by trained professionals and supported by

incredible volunteers. Young people today face complex challenges, from navigating social media and new technologies to experiencing at first hand the devastating effects of antisocial behaviour, crime and violence. It is undeniable that those challenges, and therefore the way we tackle them, are constantly changing.

Talent and potential exist in every postcode in this country, but opportunity does not. Fewer than half of all respondents to our youth participation survey agree that there are enough clubs and activities in their area. As the Member of Parliament for Barnsley South, I know about the huge contribution and value of organisations such as the Barnsley Youth Choir, with hundreds of young people taking part and young people across Barnsley being given amazing experiences, opportunities and skills. Since becoming the Minister with responsibility for youth, I have been pleased to visit youth organisations, from the Really NEET project in Rotherham to Sport at the Heart in Brent.

Tahir Ali: Recently, it was announced that one of the youth centres that has been saved in my constituency is the Concord youth centre, which serves one of the most deprived wards in the country. I would welcome the Minister visiting it at the earliest opportunity.

Stephanie Peacock: I am grateful for that kind invitation, and I will do my best to visit in the near future.

Although the Department for Culture, Media and Sport is the lead Department for out-of-school youth provision, as a former teacher and a constituency MP who visits schools regularly, I know that support for young people is a challenge that can and should be met across Government. That is why the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport announced in November last year the co-production of an ambitious new national youth strategy. That strategy will put young people back in charge of their own destiny, providing them with meaningful choices and chances.

We have now begun our engagement with young people and the sectors that work with them, as part of the co-production process. We kick-started that process back in November, when I had the opportunity to meet a group of #iWill ambassadors. They told me how important it is for local areas to empower their young people, and they also raised concerns about mental health, youth loneliness, education and work opportunities. I have also met other stakeholders in the sector, such as Girlguiding, the Youth Endowment Fund and the National Association of Boys and Girls Clubs, to listen to those who work closely with young people and who provide them with access to trusted adults, safe spaces and new opportunities.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): Will the Minister give way?

Stephanie Peacock: I am really sorry, but in the interests of time, I will make some progress.

Those stakeholders experience youth work at first hand, and it is vital we hear from them about the challenges that young people and the sector face, as we build the national youth strategy. A vital part of co-producing the strategy will take place through our youth advisory board and the expert advisory group, both of which will be involved throughout the strategy development process.

They will provide expertise, challenge and a diverse range of perspectives. I joined the first meeting of the expert advisory group, and I look forward to dropping into a meeting of the youth advisory group soon. Its members have already provided a wealth of valuable information, which will of course inform our thinking.

In addition to listening to the insights from those groups, we are engaging in a number of other ways to ensure that all young people have the opportunity to have their say—particularly those whose voices are too often excluded. We will work closely with expert organisations, which will lead a range of engagement activities with young people. That includes a wide-reaching national survey asking about young people's needs, challenges and priorities, which we will launch very soon. The survey is currently being finalised in conjunction with our expert groups. I do not want to pre-empt what it will include, but I would expect it to cover a wide range of issues, such as what young people's current needs are, whether they have access to safe spaces, what they would like to have access to outside of school, and much more. The expert organisations will also be conducting in-depth focus groups and innovative events with young people to develop solutions.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Stephanie Peacock: I am really sorry, but in the interests of time, I will make more progress.

We will provide more information to MPs within the next month regarding the development of the national youth strategy. That will include an engagement toolkit so that MPs can run their own workshops and discussions with young people or share this toolkit with organisations in their constituencies that work with young people. We will also share information regarding the national survey once it is live. It is vital that we reach young people from all parts of the country, and we will be asking MPs to help with that.

As I have set out, the national youth strategy is being led by my Department. However, increasing access to universal and targeted youth provision is a shared mission across Government. Therefore, we want the national youth strategy to co-ordinate the work of Government, helping to ensure that all young people from every corner of the country have access to the services they need.

My hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield specifically raised the young futures hubs, which will be placed in local communities to improve the way that young people can access opportunities. My Department is working closely with the Department for Education, the Home Office and others to take that forward. Tomorrow, the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend for Lewisham East (Janet Daby), and I will co-chair the first meeting of the young futures ministerial group, which sits under the safer streets mission board. That will be the first step towards delivering a new cross-Government approach to supporting young people.

Today's debate has focused on young people's access to universal and targeted provision. This Government are committed to delivering on our national missions, and young people and their access to the opportunities they deserve form a vital part of that. We have an opportunity, through the national youth strategy, to work collectively, and across Government, to set a new direction for young people, listening to their needs and responding through universal and targeted youth provision.

The debate has been incredibly popular, and I am sorry I have not been able to take all the interventions. This has been a great opportunity to showcase the role of youth provision and the difference it makes to young people, and I look forward to seeing what we do together. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield once again on securing this important debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Employer National Insurance Contributions: Police Forces

4.31 pm

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of planned changes to employer national insurance contributions on police forces.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Allin-Khan, and I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on this important issue. I rise to address a matter of significant concern that will affect police forces in my constituency and across the country.

Hon. Members will be aware of the broader tax and fiscal challenges presented by the Government in the autumn Budget, including changes to the agricultural property relief and the cruel cutting of the winter fuel payment, which have been rightly widely condemned, and to which I have objected many times in this House. In fact, this room was jam-packed last night with hon. Members from across the House condemning the Government's family farm tax. People sat on the ledges here trying to speak—some were not able to—such was the feeling against some of the disastrous consequences of the Budget.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Esther McVey: I will not just yet. Please allow me to make the case, and then I will come back to the hon. Gentleman. We know about the removal of the winter fuel payment from nearly 10 million pensioners, we know about the family farm tax and we know about the VAT on private schools. All have received much attention in this House, but we must not overlook the breadth of the ramifications of the autumn Budget, particularly the changes to employer national insurance contributions. They will have a devastating impact on individual employers and businesses, but their impact on our treasured public services has been widely overlooked. I want to focus my comments on the impact on our police forces.

You will be wondering, Dr Allin-Khan, how the Member for Tatton knows what is going to happen here. Did the Treasury conduct an impact assessment? Did the Chancellor generously share the assessment with Members from across the House? Were police forces consulted on such changes? The answer to all those questions is no, as is often the case with the Government's policy announcements.

Late last year, I submitted freedom of information requests to every police force in the UK, asking for the expected additional costs that each will incur as a result of the Chancellor's hike in employer national insurance contributions. I was shocked, yet unsurprised, to learn of the devastating impact that the policy will have on our police forces. In my county of Cheshire, the local constabulary will face an additional £3.7 million per year in employer national insurance costs.

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way and for securing this debate. She is making an excellent speech, as always. She and I are both Cheshire MPs, and we are fortunate to work with the Cheshire constabulary, one of the best forces in the country. Like me, however, she will know the challenges that Cheshire police face with

rural crime. It is estimated that the changes to employer national insurance contributions will cost the force £3.7 million. Does she share my concern that that could have a significant impact on rural crime, in particular, especially if cuts are made or funding is diverted away from rural into urban areas?

Esther McVey: My hon. Friend and neighbouring MP makes a valid point; £3.7 million is the equivalent of about 67 police officers. That is a recurring expense, not a one-off. In places such as Devon and Cornwall, the police will face a £6.3 million tax bill each year. Greater Manchester will be hit with a whopping extra tax bill of £11.9 million each year. Those are just a few examples, and the list goes on.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): The estimated cost for the west midlands is in the region of £12.8 million, which is a huge amount of money. What this Government do not seem to understand is that when the pressure of national insurance is put on to businesses, people cannot squeeze and squeeze profit margins; in the end, that will impact employment, training, and so on. When it comes to the public sector, if we keep squeezing and squeezing, the money has to come from somewhere. Does that mean reduced public services—fewer police officers, as in this case—or will the burden come back on the taxpayer?

Esther McVey: My right hon. Friend might have hit on a point, as the burden could well come back to the taxpayer. Remember that this is tax—it is money that will be going on tax, and a bill that the Government are imposing. However we look at it, it is money that the frontline police service are being deprived of. Let us consider the financial burden that the changes will place on the police force. Employer national insurance contributions represent a significant cost for everyone, but they will hit the police especially hard. For police forces that employ a number of police officers and staff to protect our communities, the cumulative cost of the increase will run well into the tens of millions of pounds. To put that into perspective, take West Yorkshire, where the figure of £11.2 million per year is the equivalent of 220 police officers. That is potentially 220 fewer police officers keeping our communities safe as a direct result of the Government's Budget.

Let me name a few other places, such as my home area of Merseyside—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"]—Thank you very much indeed. It will be paying an extra tax bill every year of £7 million, which is roughly 130 police officers. Kent will be paying more than £6 million, which is about 100 police officers a year, and Thames Valley police will face an £8 million tax bill every year.

John Slinger: The right hon. Lady is making an entertaining speech, as is often the case. In the midst of all those words about tax, I merely point out the Conservative party's two unfunded national insurance tax cuts and the £22 billion black hole that is based on unfunded spending pledges and kicking the can down the road. What is her suggestion for filling that devastating black hole, which affects our constituents? Is it more austerity, an increase in borrowing or other tax rises? Ultimately, this Government, like any Government, have to deal with the crisis that is a £22 billion black hole.

Esther McVey: I think I need to pull the hon. Gentleman up straight away. This is not in any way an entertaining speech—indeed, I would put this down as a horror speech. This is a disgrace of monumental proportions, so the word “entertaining” was used absolutely incorrectly.

Let me talk about the choices that different Governments have made, and where money could have been saved. One example is GB Energy, which the new Government thought they could find money for. They could not find money for the pensioners or the farmers—this Government are giving away half a billion pounds a year to farmers overseas, but they cannot find that half a billion pounds here. We would stop money being spent on things like GB Energy, which does not produce any energy; it seems to me like another quango that will cost money. We would not have increased foreign aid, and I can tell Members one thing that we would not have done: we would not have capitulated to the rail unions, finding money for the railway workers without any modernisation whatsoever. There is a big list of things that we would not have been paying for.

John Slinger: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Esther McVey: I will not take another intervention, because I cannot quite get over the word “entertaining” being used about such a devastating policy, which will have devastating impacts on the streets of all our communities. There is a real risk that police forces will have to scale back on recruitment—that is not entertaining. There is a real risk that they will have to cut back on vital training—that is not entertaining—or reduce operational spending in other areas, which again is not entertaining. These decisions could have serious consequences for the police service’s ability to deliver an effective police force. The planned national insurance increases will make it harder for police forces to recruit new officers, particularly in areas where the cost of living is already high. The Government have committed to recruiting more officers, yet those efforts will be undermined by these fiscal pressures through taxation.

A common theme of this Government is their lack of foresight. They failed to consult with Back Benchers, public services and Government Departments before steamrolling ahead with this policy. They failed to understand the impact of the rise in employer national insurance costs on our public services, a mistake so basic that it is sometimes hard to comprehend. I think we all remember the immediate outcry that we heard from GPs, charities, social care providers and hospices. I remember being in the main Chamber when the Secretary of State for Health came to the Dispatch Box to answer questions on this policy, and he was taken aback. He did not know how to answer those questions, and his plea to the Chancellor at the time was, “Where are we going to get that extra money? I hope I will get that extra money, and I will come back to Members later with answers.”

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Government must know that this policy is damaging the ability of the police to operate? The Government know it is causing damage to the public sector, and that is why they have exempted the NHS, but they have failed to exempt other public sector services such as the police. They cannot pretend that this policy is not causing damage.

Esther McVey: My hon. Friend is correct. That is why I highlighted the cost implications of the policy to the Secretary of State for Health that day on the Floor of the House, and he was absolutely taken aback. There was muttering among the Government Front Benchers, and the Government put in a solution straight away, but they overlooked the police. Later in my speech, I will come on to the fact that the Government now think they will put money into this area.

Fewer police will inevitably have broader consequences for public safety. Police officers are on the frontlines, tackling serious and organised crime, addressing domestic violence and responding to emergencies. Every officer we lose or fail to recruit means less protection for communities such as Tatton. To give an example, in Cheshire there has been a significant rise in serious sexual assaults by people who are in this country illegally. Money that should have gone into supporting our police force to halt that crime will not be there, which is making our streets less safe.

This Government are fiscally illiterate. They made a £25 billion grab in employer national insurance contributions at the Budget, without really thinking where that money would come from. Remember, the Government said that they did not want to tax working people, yet we know this will hit working people—the Government never thought where that money would come from. Instead, the measure was born from ideological reasons, whether that meant funding the Government’s net zero obsession, foreign aid or their union paymasters. In introducing the change, the Government have failed to consider the most basic duty of any Government: to protect their citizens.

John Slinger: On that point, will the right hon. Lady give way?

Esther McVey: I am afraid I will not.

I understand that the Government say that they will pick up the £230 million tab, but that still means that the Government will be paying a tax bill rather than having money to spend on frontline police. Last month, we heard the Home Secretary announce a £200 million boost to neighbourhood policing to fund the recruitment of 13,000 new neighbourhood police officers, as the Government said before the election, although they had been very quiet on that for a long period of time.

I wonder whether the Government can do that. The numbers are very similar: £200 million for 13,000 new neighbourhood police officers, yet they have given themselves a £230 million a year tax bill. Will those 13,000 neighbourhood police officers ever materialise? In her summing up, will the Minister say what will happen, particularly in light of the national insurance contribution black hole, as those national insurance contributions are to be paid year in, year out? Will the Government pay for those police officers, year in, year out? If so, what will be the amount paid during a whole Parliament? Where will that money come from?

I urge the Government and the Chancellor, through the Minister, to stop this ill-thought-through, ham-fisted Budget change to employer national insurance contributions. The only solution to the problem—

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): On that point, will the right hon. Lady give way?

Esther McVey: Can I finish my sentence? There is only one solution to the problem that will have the correct consequences: scrap the diabolical tax on our police forces.

Adam Jogee: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for giving way. I want to say two quick things. First, my grandmother was born and raised in Birkenhead, so we have some common heritage. Secondly, the right hon. Lady just said that certain Labour Members are driven by ideology, but I want it to be noted that I am driven by a love of country and, in this context, by being tough on crime and on the causes of crime. I thought it was important to provide that clarification for the House.

Esther McVey: I thank the hon. Member for saying that. I hope he too shares my delight that Liverpool is top of the football division as well. We all should share a love of this country, and we should all want the best for this country. I too want a safe country, so it is vital that the money goes to the police and the police forces to ensure that happens, and not on increased tax bills. That is why I am asking for this ham-fisted tax increase to be reversed.

4.48 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Allin-Khan. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) for securing this important debate. She recently highlighted the significant increase in costs to police forces resulting from the Government's decision to raise employer national insurance contributions. I begin by expressing my sincere thanks to our local neighbourhood police teams for their dedicated work in supporting citizens and communities across my Aldridge-Brownhills constituency. They protect the public, help tackle crime at the grassroots level, and often go way above and beyond.

Let me turn to the impact of the increased employer national insurance contributions on police forces. Tempting though it is, I will refrain from delving into the decision by the Labour police and crime commissioner to close and sell off the police station in Aldridge. However, I want to make it clear to my constituents that I will continue to stand up for them and for our share of policing resources.

According to HMRC's impact assessment, the Government's changes to employer national insurance contributions—I would actually call them choices—will affect approximately 1.2 million employers, which, as we have heard today, includes police authorities. It is my understanding that for the West Midlands specifically, this policy choice—let us remember that that is what it is—will cost a staggering £12.8 million. In my view, that is £12.8 million that should be spent on frontline policing, especially if this Government are genuinely serious about tackling crime. If an average officer's wage is, say, £35,000, by my calculations that £12.8 million could fund the equivalent of an additional 365 police officers just in one policing authority area alone.

Last week, I raised that issue in the Chamber with the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), particularly because she seemed a little unaware of the cost. I was left unclear about its local impact. I ask the

Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention to confirm whether the funds awarded to police authorities for the upcoming financial year to cover increased national insurance costs will be added to base budgets, or is this a one-off grant? In addition, has the new funding for the 13,000 neighbourhood police officers promised in the Labour party manifesto taken into account the additional burden of national insurance increases from April?

Unlike the constituencies of some of my rural colleagues, my constituency is on the periphery of the west midlands; it is not entirely rural, but it is not exactly urban either. Consequently, we often find ourselves competing for resources with Birmingham and to some extent Walsall. I would be grateful for clarification today on the 13,000 additional officers promised in that Labour party manifesto, with the West Midlands police and crime commissioner saying that they will be funded by a neighbourhood policing grant. Can the Minister confirm how long the Home Office has budgeted for these additional officers, or will individual forces need to precept the ongoing costs? I ask because it is not just this year that we must consider; we must also look to the future.

I will conclude by saying that we need clarity and we need answers. My constituents need reassurance that they will not be left facing the consequences of yet another poorly thought-out Labour policy or broken manifesto promise.

4.52 pm

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Thank you, Dr Allin-Khan, for the opportunity to speak in this very important debate; it is good to have an opportunity to air some of these ideas.

Let me point something out to the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey). I sought to pay her a compliment about her oratorical style; these issues are not entertaining, of course, but I found her oratory powerful. However, in this instance I think the content is wrong.

The Government have secured a £1.1 billion funding boost for policing. It is a real-terms increase in the settlement on what the previous Conservative Government would have provided of 4.1% in real terms and a cash increase of 6.6%. That is a significant increase in funding and will allow this Government to provide the additional officers and support to our police forces that will enable us to take back control of those streets from the criminals.

I will conclude by saying that law and order is not an issue on which any particular party has a monopoly. Government Members and I think Members from across the entire House care greatly about supporting our police officers—their leadership as well as rank-and-file officers, whom I meet regularly, as I am sure the right hon. Lady does in her area. We want to support them, and this new Labour Government are supporting them.

4.54 pm

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Allin-Khan. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) on securing this important debate. Like the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), I thank my local police force for all the excellent work it does and its collaboration with me.

For years, thanks to the previous Conservative Government, policing in this country has been underfunded, undermined and increasingly overstretched. The new Labour Government claim that they are putting more money into frontline policing, but the reality on the ground appears completely different. Across the country, forces are battling severe funding pressures. In Devon and Cornwall, the police have been relying on second home council tax increases to plug their financial gaps. The right hon. Member for Tatton pointed out that the increased cost for the Devon and Cornwall force is about £6.3 million. With the rise in employer national insurance contributions, there is a real risk that forces will face yet more impossible choices come April and will have to cut officer numbers or pass the bill on to local taxpayers.

The £230 million allocated in the police grant report is supposed to cover the national insurance rise, but when the broader Budget is examined, the reality is clear. Although the headline figure is £986 million, if we factor in the reliance on council tax precepts, the Government's so-called increase in police funding is only about £426 million of new cash. That is simply not enough to ensure safe and effective policing across the country. Forces are already stretched to breaking point, and officers are unable to focus on the crimes that matter the most to our communities. According to Home Office figures, 6,000 cases are closed daily without a suspect being identified, and three in every four burglaries and car thefts go unsolved. Yet instead of fixing the underlying problems, the Government are adding new financial burdens on forces, which will inevitably mean fewer officers on our streets.

In rural constituencies such as mine, rural crime is up 4.3% year on year, and criminal gangs are targeting farmyards and villages. The theft of agricultural equipment, including GPS systems, has spiked by 137%, yet just 0.1% of police officers are dedicated to tackling rural crime. For my constituents and those of other hon. Members, that is nothing but shameful. The rise in national insurance will only make the problem worse, forcing already strained rural policing teams to spread their resources even thinner.

The police grant report does not directly mention rural crime once. I fear that tells my constituents and those of other hon. Members representing rural areas everything they need to know about where the Government's priorities lie.

We need to think bigger. If the Government truly want to invest in frontline policing, they should scrap the failing police and crime commissioner system, which drains millions that could be spent on actual frontline policing. Our Devon and Cornwall PCC is already on her third chief constable and her second deputy police and crime commissioner. We need to fund officers, not office administrators.

Let us not forget the wider impact of the national insurance increase on our public services. The Liberal Democrats opposed the hike from the beginning, calling for GPs, firefighters, hospices, care providers and NHS dentists to be exempt from the rise. Petroc doctors' surgery in St Columb Major in my North Cornwall constituency told me last Friday that it faces a bill of £180,000 in national insurance rises and increased wages.

It is completely counterproductive to increase funding for vital services such as healthcare on the one hand while taxing them more on the other.

The exact same principles apply to the police. If the Government refuse to cancel this damaging rise, at the very least they should exempt policing from the additional costs. For years, forces across the country have struggled to deliver the neighbourhood policing that our communities expect and deserve. The national insurance increase threatens to take yet more money away from those who need it most and will reduce the number of frontline officers and bobbies on the beat.

I conclude by asking the Minister whether the Government will commit to properly funding frontline policing without relying on council tax increases. Will they support my call for a dedicated rural crime taskforce, so that rural communities such as mine are not left behind? If they insist on pushing through this flawed national insurance rise, will they at least protect essential services such as policing from its worst impacts. If we are really serious about making our streets safer, we need more officers on the streets, not the higher costs that risk endangering us all.

5 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): Thank you, Dr Allin-Khan, for chairing this debate. I also thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) for securing this important debate, and for all her work in raising awareness of this issue and its consequences.

The last Government recruited 20,000 more police officers, ensuring that there were more police officers on our streets than ever before. Why would anyone think that the solution to any problem would be a tax raid on our police forces? Any MP who has engaged with their PCC or chief constable knows that the funding settlement put forward for local police forces by this Government is entirely inadequate. Just the other week, when questioned by Nick Robinson about the absurd tax raid on local police forces and the fact that the police funding settlement will cut the number of police on our streets, the Minister conceded that she was not going to pretend that it is not challenging for police forces.

Since then, the Government have painted a different picture, understating the impact that this could have on our police forces and on police numbers. At first glance, the settlement may appear generous in cash terms. However, there is a sleight of hand. The Government are claiming to have increased police funding by £1.09 billion, masking their tax raid on our police forces and their failure to build police pay awards into the baseline. The previous Conservative Government provided in-year funding for PCCs to cover the police pay award, adding this to the baseline for subsequent years. By contrast, the in-year adjustment for this year's pay settlement was not added to the baseline, so about £200 million of the apparent increase this year simply makes up for that omission.

Furthermore, as hon. Members have said, some £230 million of this apparently generous settlement will go straight back to the Treasury to pay for the Government's national insurance tax raid on our local police forces. The Government are literally taxing the police off our streets. Therefore, about £430 million of this apparently generous increase just makes up for the Government's choices. Adjusting for that, the increase in funding for

[*Matt Vickers*]

5.6 pm

policing next year is not £1.09 billion, but more like £660 million, or nearly £300 million less than the last increase under the previous Government. Make no mistake: this tax raid on local police forces, created by our own Government, will have real consequences for communities across England and Wales.

There are estimates that the shortfall in police funding could see 1,800 fewer police on our streets. My force, Cleveland police, has already been placed under special measures, with a recent report from His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services giving it an inadequate rating for responding to children at risk of harm and for investigating child abuse, neglect and exploitation. It is deeply concerning and entirely unacceptable that vulnerable young people are being let down in such a way. Protecting children should be a priority for the Labour Government and for Cleveland's Labour police and crime commissioner. These children deserve better. Does the Minister agree that creating a shortfall in funding for a force could lead to more failures in responding to and investigating child abuse, neglect and exploitation in Cleveland?

Adam Jogee: The shadow Minister knows I am a reasonable man, and I am not going to engage in partisan games for the fun of it—not all the time, anyway—but I want to draw him back to his use of the word “inadequate” to describe the settlement. Will he confirm that, if he had been the Policing Minister, the settlement would have been higher, and if so, how would that have been paid for?

Matt Vickers: As the hon. Member will have seen, in previous years, we were increasing the funding by more. In fact, last year we increased by £300 million more than what Labour is doing this year. We were not raiding our police forces with national insurance tax raids; we were putting the pay award into the baseline. I would be wasting less money on GB Energy. I would not be looking to give train drivers on £55,000 a year a bumper pay rise of almost £10,000, with no efforts to increase productivity. It is about priorities. Policing was a priority for the Conservative Government. That is why 20,000 more police officers were put on the streets, reaching record numbers.

The Government have pointed to their promise to recruit 13,000 new neighbourhood police officers, but we all know that a relatively small number—just 3,000—are new officers. Most of the claimed 13,000 are either reassigned or redeployed, are part-time volunteers or are police community support officers with no powers of arrest. That redeployment is concerning for many. Will the Minister assure MPs that when their constituents ring 999, they will not have to wait longer for an emergency response because response officers have been redeployed to neighbourhoods? Will she guarantee that police numbers will not fall any lower than the current level as a result of her funding settlement?

Given the nature of modern policing and overtime, to what extent did the Government consider the impact of overtime on the increased national insurance cost, and could there be a further shortfall as a result? We owe a huge debt of gratitude to our brave, hard-working police officers, PCSOs and police staff. They deserve resources and support, not tax raids and funding shortfalls.

The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): It is a pleasure to serve under you this afternoon, Dr Allin-Khan. Let me begin by thanking the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) for securing this debate. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (John Slinger) about the right hon. Lady's skills of oratory. I did not agree with what she actually said, but she has a very engaging and enjoyable style of communication. She should take that as a compliment.

I also thank the other hon. Members who have spoken this afternoon: the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth), another Cheshire MP; the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), who recognised at the start of her contribution the valuable role of neighbourhood policing in her area; and the hon. Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson), who intervened. The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire) spoke on behalf of the Liberal Democrats; I was rather intrigued, because I am long enough in the tooth to remember when Liberal Democrat Ministers in the coalition Government actively argued for putting PCCs on the statute book in the 2010 to 2015 Parliament. I heard his comments on rural crime, which a number of Members are very concerned about. My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby set out clearly this Government's commitment to policing and the police settlement that was finalised last month.

I want to take a moment to express my gratitude to each and every police officer, staff member and volunteer who works tirelessly, often in the most difficult circumstances, to keep our communities safe. This Government recognise the invaluable contribution that they make, and the need to ensure that policing is properly funded and protected. The challenges that police personnel face are very real. It is essential that they are equipped and resourced to do their jobs effectively. The resourcing of police forces is, understandably, a subject of considerable interest for parliamentarians and the public. Discussions that help to shine a light on these important issues, such as this debate, are to be welcomed.

In a moment I will turn to the specific focus of the debate—national insurance contributions—but in the interest of providing some important context and background, I will refer briefly to the police funding settlement that was put before the House in January. The settlement for 2025-26 provides an increase of up to £1.1 billion to policing, taking the Government's total investment to £19.6 billion. We have listened to the police, and we know the challenges that they face.

I gently say to Opposition Members, who perhaps served in previous Conservative Governments, that there is quite a history with how the Conservatives funded or did not fund policing. I know the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers), takes great delight in talking about the additional police officers towards the end of the Conservative time in office, but he also needs to remember the huge cuts that happened to policing. More than 20,000 police officers and thousands upon thousands of police staff were lost in the years of austerity and through the cuts that the Conservative Governments brought forward.

John Slinger: Does the Minister agree that if police officers are cut by 20,000, and then their numbers are replaced by 20,000, not a huge amount has been done to boost police numbers?

Dame Diana Johnson: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I am also conscious of the loss of experienced officers in that 20,000. We know that the service is now very young; I think about 40% of officers have under five years of service. That presents all sorts of challenges for policing.

I want to make it clear that we have increased the funding available for neighbourhood policing by an additional £100 million. That is compared with the provisional settlement that was announced at the end of last year. We in this Chamber can all agree that neighbourhood policing is so important to our constituents, and the figure for that will now be at £200 million. That investment is to kick-start the delivery of the 13,000 neighbourhood police officers, PCSOs and specials that the Labour Government promised in their manifesto. It will also ensure that public confidence in policing is restored. As I said when opening the debate on the police grant report last week in the main Chamber, the settlement underlines the Government's commitment to working with the police to deliver the safer streets that all our constituents deserve.

It is worth saying that I spoke to the PCC in Cheshire last week about the funding settlement. He was positive about the settlement that had been announced for his force. He did not raise any specific issues on national insurance, and the force did not raise any concerns in the consultation on the provisional settlement after it was published in December.

Esther McVey: Did the Minister receive a further letter from the chief constable, expressing serious concerns about the rising number of serious sexual assaults going on in Cheshire?

Dame Diana Johnson: As I have just said, the PCC I spoke to last week did not raise any concerns about the financial settlement. Obviously, the PCC and the chief constable use that money in the way that they decide for Cheshire. I have certainly had conversations with the chief constable of Cheshire, and the right hon. Lady is right that I have received a letter from the chief constable that was copied to a number of Members of Parliament in Cheshire.

I accept and recognise that the changes to national insurance contributions will have an impact on public sector budgets, including policing. Although the decision to increase national insurance was made to ensure the sustainability of essential public services, I recognise that the changes create additional cost pressures for police forces. It is useful to note that in 2003, and in 2011 under the coalition Government, there was an increase in employer national insurance to fund the national health service and wider national priorities. So this is not unusual; Governments of both complexions have taken forward changes to national insurance.

It is also worth noting that the changes introduced in the Budget last year broadly return national insurance contributions revenue as a proportion of GDP to the level that they were before the previous Government's cuts to employee and self-employed national insurance

contributions. That sets the context, and this has been done in a way that does not result in higher taxes in people's payslips.

Wendy Morton: When the right hon. Lady says that this change will not impact on employee's payslips, she completely misses the point: whether in a business or the public sector, we cannot just keep squeezing and squeezing and expect things to continue as they are. If it is a business, we squeeze them out of business—there are no jobs; there will be no pay packet. If we keep squeezing the public sector, there will be no public services.

Dame Diana Johnson: With the greatest of respect to the right hon. Lady, who I think was Chief Whip under the disastrous premiership of Liz Truss, I am not really prepared to take lessons on economic stability and how to run the economy from a Government that trashed the economy and that caused such devastation to many families through the rise in interest rates and mortgages. I think perhaps a little humility might be in order.

We have set aside funding to protect the spending power of the public sector, including the NHS, from the direct impacts of the increase in employer national insurance. That is why we are providing compensation of £230.3 million to support forces with the cost of changes to national insurance and to ensure that no force is left out of pocket as a result. The right hon. Member for Tatton may like to know that that is similar to the funding provided by the previous Government in the 2024-25 police funding settlement to cover the additional costs of pension changes. Again, this is not unusual.

The right hon. Lady may have concerns about the £3.7 million pressure reported by her local police force as a result of the changes and the impact that that could have on officer numbers. As set out in the settlement papers, however, we are fully covering those costs. Actually, Cheshire is getting £3.9 million in national insurance compensation for next year—more than the anticipated need. That is alongside the £200 million that we are investing in neighbourhood policing to ensure not only that officer numbers are maintained, but that visible policing in our communities increases. Our mission is clear, and the funding provided in this settlement will ensure that forces across the country are equipped to meet the challenges that they face and to protect our communities.

As I have said a number of times this afternoon, I of course recognise that any additional pressures on forces are concerning. That is why we will continue to engage closely with forces and finance leads to ensure policing has the resources it needs.

I thank the right hon. Member again for securing this debate, and thank all those who have spoken. We are compensating for the national insurance increases to ensure that forces have the resources they need to protect visible neighbourhood policing. Our position could not be clearer. We will work in lockstep with the law enforcement system in our shared effort to keep people safe, whether that involves restoring and protecting the long-standing tradition of British policing, such as neighbourhood policing, or acting to combat the most dangerous emerging threats. This Government are wholly committed to providing the police with the powers, resources and tools that they need to protect the public.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (in the Chair): I call Esther McVey to wind up the debate.

5.19 pm

Esther McVey: I thank all Members for taking part in today's debate. I think I understood from everyone that they would not want to see police officers taxed off our streets. There was one area on which I did not get consensus, which was why I said that the current Government were fiscally illiterate: what Government Members did not seem to understand is that money going to pay for extra taxes means money that will not be going on the frontline. The very fact that it is going in taxes and has to be compensated for shows that it will not go on the frontline. That is why I am asking for this policy to be stopped and reversed.

There seems to be collective amnesia among those on the Government Benches. The coalition Government came into power because the previous Labour Government pretty much crashed the economy. That was why the coalition was voted in. I have to say that I already see—in just seven months—that this Labour Government

with that awful, awful Budget are doing exactly the same thing: they are crashing the economy all over again, but in record time. I just want to make sure that our police and our streets are protected.

I wish to thank the Minister because I know that she takes this matter very seriously. Whatever she said or did not say in the debate today, I know that she will take that message back and I know that she will be fighting to get this terrible employer national insurance contribution policy reversed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the impact of planned changes to employer National Insurance contributions on police forces.

5.21 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 11 February 2025

ATTORNEY GENERAL

Crown Prosecution Service: Contingencies Fund Advance

The Solicitor General (Lucy Rigby): The Crown Prosecution Service requires a Contingencies Fund advance of £60 million to cover urgent payments of resource departmental expenditure limit expenditures, such as February payroll, and to pay suppliers' invoices. Due to the uplift in funding sought at the supplementary estimate, this has led to the CPS requiring a Contingencies Fund advance to ensure it has the cash required ahead of the parliamentary approval of the supplementary estimate.

Parliamentary approval for additional resource of £60 million will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Crown Prosecution Service. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £60 million will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS433]

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Growth Guarantee Scheme

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas): I wish to make Members aware of the details of a proposed variant of the existing growth guarantee scheme that is designed to increase uptake by businesses of green assets that facilitate the transition to a low-carbon economy.

The GGS was launched on 1 July 2024 and is facilitated by the Government-owned British Business Bank and delivered through its delivery partners. Under the scheme, lenders offer facilities of up to £2 million to support businesses that would otherwise be unable to access the finance they need, or would only be able to do so on worse terms.

Green GGS uses the infrastructure of the existing GGS programme to help increase the supply of affordable finance for businesses investing in green technologies. Lenders face uncertainty over the future value of these green assets in the instance of borrower default, due to the pace of technological advances and a lack of observable track record or data in the relevant second-hand markets. As a result, lenders raise the up-front cost of financing green assets to mitigate this uncertainty, or simply choose not to finance the green asset. This in turn dampens business demand for green investment.

The BBB's GGS variant is designed to address this uncertainty by setting a floor on losses that a lender would take if a borrower defaulted on the loan. This would give lenders the confidence to support finance for green assets or lower the up-front cost of that finance, increasing the supply of finance available to small and medium-sized enterprises to invest in green assets. The terms of the programme ensure that the benefit of the guarantee is passed to the business.

Initially, the British Business Bank will reallocate funding from the existing GGS to pilot this scheme with a single lender, facilitating an initial portfolio of £30 million

of investment in green assets. There will be no change to the maximum lending facilitated across both GGS variants, which will remain at £2.2 billion, as notified to Parliament by means of a written ministerial statement made on 24 May 2024. Any future proposed increase in the capacity of green GGS will be notified as applicable.

I will be laying a departmental minute today containing a description of the liability undertaken.

[HCWS432]

TREASURY

Public Service Pensions: Indexation and Revaluation 2025

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Darren Jones): Legislation governing public service pensions in payment requires them to be increased annually by the same percentage as additional pensions (state earnings related pension and state second pension). Public service pensions will therefore be increased from 7 April 2025 by 1.7%, in line with the annual increase in the consumer prices index up to September 2024, except for those public service pensions which have been in payment for less than a year, which will receive a pro rata increase. This will ensure that public service pensions take account of increases in the cost of living and their purchasing power is maintained.

Separately, in the career average revalued earnings public service pension schemes introduced in 2014 and 2015, pensions in accrual are revalued annually in relation to either prices or earnings depending on the terms specified in their scheme regulations. The Public Service Pensions Act 2013 requires the Treasury to specify a measure of prices and of earnings to be used for revaluation by these schemes.

The prices measure is the consumer prices index up to September 2024. Public service schemes which rely on a measure of prices, therefore, will use the figure of 1.7% for the prices element of revaluation.

The earnings measure is the whole economy year-on-year change in average weekly earnings (non-seasonally adjusted and including bonuses and arrears) up to September 2024. Public service schemes which rely on a measure of earnings, therefore, will use the figure of 4.5% for the earnings element of revaluation.

The effective date of revaluation listed in the order is 1 April 2025, but some schemes have chosen to move their effective revaluation date to 6 April 2025 in order to manage interactions with the annual tax allowance.

Revaluation is one part of the amount of pension that members earn in a year and needs to be considered in conjunction with the amount of in-year accrual. Typically, schemes with lower revaluation will have faster accrual and therefore members will earn more pension per year. The following list shows how the main public service schemes will be affected by revaluation:

| Scheme | Police | Fire-fighters | Civil Service | NHS | Teachers | LGPS | Armed Forces | Judicial |
|-------------------------------|--------|---------------|---------------|------|----------|------|--------------|----------|
| Revaluation for active member | 2.95% | 4.5% | 1.7% | 3.2% | 3.3% | 1.7% | 4.5% | 1.7% |

[HCWS437]

DEFENCE

Ministry of Defence: 2025-26 Estimate

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey):

The Ministry of Defence Votes A Estimate 2025-26, has been laid before the House of Commons on 11 February 2025 as HC638. This outlines the maximum numbers of personnel to be maintained for each service in the armed forces during financial year 2025-26.

These numbers do not constitute the strength of the armed forces, which is published separately in the “UK Armed Forces Quarterly Service Personnel Statistics”.

[HCWS438]

EDUCATION

National Apprenticeship Week

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson):

This is National Apprenticeship Week, when we celebrate the life-changing opportunities that apprenticeships offer people up and down this country. I want to update the House on a range of steps that this Government are taking to introduce the greater flexibility in our apprenticeships system that learn to break down barriers to opportunity and boost economic growth.

First, we have confirmed today that we will be changing the rules relating to achievement of English and maths qualifications as part of an apprenticeship for over-19s. Upskilling in English and maths will continue to remain a key feature of all apprenticeships, and from today we have listened to employers and will be offering more flexibility over when a stand-alone qualification is required in addition to this.

All apprentices will be required to secure, and will be assessed on, the job-specific skills—English and maths—that they need. But, moving forward, employers will have more flexibility over whether adult apprentices—over-19s—are required to achieve a stand-alone English and maths qualifications. In future, adult apprentices will be able to complete their apprenticeship if they have demonstrated that they have the skills—including relevant English and maths skills—to be effective in the role without undertaking a stand-alone English and maths qualification. All 16 to 18-year-old apprentices will continue to be required and funded to secure up to a level 2 qualification in English and maths if they do not hold one, consistent with our expectation that all young people should have a meaningful further opportunity to secure a level 2 qualification in English and maths post 16. This delivers the flexibility that employers have long called for, and we expect it to lead to thousands more qualified apprentices in a range of key sectors, including in social care and construction.

Secondly, we will reduce the minimum duration of apprenticeships to eight months from August 2025. This new flexibility will mean that employers can make greater use of apprenticeships and learners can be fully trained more quickly. We expect this new flexibility to particularly benefit learners with high levels of prior learning, where the current 12-month requirement means they are not eligible for an apprenticeship; and particular

occupations that do not typically work in fixed 12-month training cycles. We will be working closely with Skills England to identify where this new flexibility will have the greatest impact. Today we are announcing that the first shorter apprenticeships to be available to all apprentices will be in priority occupations, including healthcare support workers, dual fuel smart meter installers, and production assistants in the creative industries. We will be setting out more details in due course.

Finally, in our next step towards establishing Skills England as the key driving force behind this Government's growth plans, I am confirming that the new chair of Skills England will be Phil Smith CBE, with Sir David Bell serving as vice-chair.

This team will bring together extensive industry experience in digital, tech and innovation, with decades of experience in the education and skills sector. They will work with employers, with national, regional and local government, and with providers and unions, to identify skills shortages and provide strong strategic direction for the skills system, ensuring that we have the highly skilled workforce needed to deliver our industrial strategy and the Government's plan for change. I look forward to working with them to deliver the dynamic skills system and economic growth that this country needs to thrive.

[HCWS436]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Telecare National Action Plan

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): The digital phone switchover is a necessary upgrade to our underlying national digital infrastructure as the old analogue landline network is becoming increasingly unreliable. The safety of telecare users throughout the switchover is the Government's utmost priority. That is why I am pleased to publish a joint telecare national action plan with the Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms, the hon. Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant), setting out the steps that stakeholders need to take to safeguard telecare users during the digital phone switchover.

The digital phone switchover means that traditional analogue devices, such as telephone handsets and telecare units that are currently connected to the analogue landline network, will need to be reconnected to the digital network. There is a risk that the process of migrating telecare users to digital landlines will disrupt their telecare services. Telecare users must be protected during the digital phone switchover and every effort must be taken to avoid these risks.

Our action plan is predominantly aimed at communication providers, local authorities, housing providers, third sector organisations and commercial providers. It demonstrates the Government's commitment to working with the telecare and telecommunications industries and ensuring that telecare users' safety is put first during the switchover. Officials have worked closely with stakeholders to develop and agree the actions set out in this plan.

This telecare national action plan sets out the actions that the Government expect to see delivered. The actions are set out against the following outcomes:

No telecare user will be migrated to digital landline services without the communication provider, the user or the telecare service provider confirming that the user has a compatible and functioning telecare solution in place;

Use of analogue telecare devices is phased out to ensure that only digital devices are being used. DHSC will be working with stakeholders over the coming months to set a deadline for this;

Telecare users, their support networks and their service providers understand what actions they need to take to ensure a safe migration to digital phone lines; and

Stakeholders identified within the plan collaborate to safeguard telecare users through the digital phone switchover.

The Government are committed to improving adult social care for those who draw on it, helping people to stay independent in their own homes, joining up services and improving the quality of care. The Government recently announced an independent commission into adult social care led by Baroness Louise Casey as part of their critical first step towards a national care service. While the Casey commission carries out its work, the Government are getting on with the job of reforming the system and have announced immediate actions to improve adult social care services. This includes the development of new national standards and trusted guidance for technology in social care. The new standards and guidance will make it easier for providers, commissioners and people who draw on care and support to identify the technologies that will work best for them.

The transition to digital telephone networks will lay the foundations for a next generation of telecare services that will support more personalised and early preventive interventions, and support the Government's reforms to adult social care. The plan includes examples of where local areas have utilised the opportunities presented by the digital phone switchover to advance the use of technology within their social care provision.

Given the complexity of the issue, it is possible that additional necessary actions might be identified. We will review progress against the telecare national action plan every six months and identify new actions as needed. A copy of the telecare national action plan will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses and will also be published on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS434]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Designated Vendor Directions: Enforcement

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): Today the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology has published guidelines on how the Secretary of State will approach compliance and enforcement of designated vendor directions (DVDs) issued under the Communications Act 2003, as amended by the Telecommunications (Security) Act 2021.

The 2003 Act introduced powers for the Secretary of State to issue designation notices to vendors whose presence in UK networks poses national security risks and DVDs to public communications providers (PCPs), placing controls on their use of goods and services provided by a designated vendor. The Secretary of State can issue a DVD to a PCP if they consider that it is necessary in the interests of national security and the requirements imposed by the DVD are proportionate to what is sought to be achieved by the DVD.

The Act also provides the Secretary of State with powers to ascertain whether PCPs are complying with the requirements imposed by a DVD and to enforce against a PCP where they are found to be non-compliant with the requirements in a DVD.

This guidelines cover:

- the background to DVDs and the powers available;
- the approach to enforcement action;
- how to establish whether there has been a contravention of a DVD requirement;
- how to determine whether to enforce against a contravention;
- the process for coming to a proposed penalty;
- issuing formal enforcement action;
- issuing a confirmation decision; and
- the governance for how decisions on enforcement are made and communicated.

This document acts as a guiding framework for His Majesty's Government when considering enforcement and imposing penalties in relation to non-compliance with requirements in a DVD.

[HCWS435]

Petitions

Tuesday 11 February 2025

OBSERVATIONS

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Grimsby Post Office

The petition of residents of the constituency of Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes,

Declares that, similar to an online petition which acquired 568 signatures, the Post Office should rethink their plans to close the Grimsby Post Office and take it off the 'at risk' register.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take immediate action to ensure that the Grimsby Post Office remains open to continue to provide incredibly important services to residents in the town.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by *Melanie Onn*, *Official Report*, 8 January 2025; Vol. 759, c. 962.]

[P003030]

Observations by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas):

The Government protect the post office network by setting minimum access criteria to ensure that 99% of the UK population lives within 3 miles of a post office. The access criteria ensure that however the network changes, essential services remain within local reach of all citizens.

The Post Office has the freedom to make commercial decisions regarding the composition of its network, providing it fulfils the Government-set access criteria. Decisions around individual branches are a matter for the Post Office.

The Government will continue to work closely with Post Office as it develops its transformation plan, while the Post Office continues to deliver on the 11,500 minimum branch requirements set by Government.

TRANSPORT

The Lower Thames Crossing

The petition of residents of the constituency of Sevenoaks, including Swanley and the Dartford Villages,

Declares that the lower Thames crossing is crucial to easing the relentless congestion at the Dartford crossing, which impacts thousands of residents every day; further

declares that recent disruptions across the Dartford Villages, Swanley, Crockenhill, South Darenth, and Farningham have highlighted the urgent need for this project to progress without more delays; and notes that traffic congestion frequently results in missed medical appointments, slower commutes, and interruptions for emergency services trying to reach those in need; and further notes that an online petition on this matter has received 1318 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take immediate action to expedite the delivery of the Lower Thames Crossing to alleviate the severe congestion and improve the lives of residents in the affected areas.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by *Laura Trott*, *Official Report*, 28 January 2025; Vol. 761, c. 2P.]

[P003038]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood):

I am aware of the issue of congestion at Dartford, having been to visit the Dartford crossing control room in September 2024.

The application for the lower Thames crossing development consent order was made under the Planning Act 2008. The application was submitted to the Planning Inspectorate in October 2022 and accepted in November 2022. The appointed examining authority began its examination into this application in June 2023 and concluded in December 2023. Following this, the Secretary of State received the examining authority's recommendation report on 20 March 2024, with a statutory deadline for a decision of 20 June 2024.

Following a written ministerial statement in May 2024, the statutory deadline was extended to 4 October 2024 due to the general election. The deadline has since been further extended to 23 May 2025, to allow time for the application to be considered further, including any decisions made as part of the spending review.

In the Chancellor of the Exchequer's speech of 29 January 2025, she set out that officials and National Highways are exploring options for privately financing the lower Thames crossing.

The Government recognise that transport infrastructure is vital for growth and acknowledges the critical role that roads play in our national transport system, facilitating the movement of people and goods that underpins the UK economy. We also acknowledge the need to consider all views and evidence in reaching a final decision on any planning application.

I cannot comment further on National Highways' application for development consent for the lower Thames crossing, as it remains a live application.

Written Corrections

Tuesday 11 February 2025

Ministerial Corrections

EDUCATION

School Accountability and Intervention

The following extract is from the statement on School Accountability and Intervention on 3 February 2025.

Catherine McKinnell:... Alongside a reformed Ofsted, we are creating the RISE teams, comprised of leaders with a proven track record of improving school standards. Those teams will draw on bespoke improvement plans for stuck schools, with significant investment. The previous Government made £6,000 available for stuck schools; under this Government, it will be more like £100,000 per school to drive that improvement.

[*Official Report*, 3 February 2025; Vol. 761, c. 570.]

Written correction submitted by the Minister for School Standards, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell):

Catherine McKinnell:... Alongside a reformed Ofsted, we are creating the RISE teams, comprised of leaders with a proven track record of improving school standards. Those teams will draw on bespoke improvement plans for stuck schools, with significant investment. The previous Government made £6,000 available for stuck schools; under this Government, it will be **up to £100,000** per school to drive that improvement.

TRANSPORT

Coastguard Helicopter Services

The following extract is from the Westminster Hall debate on Coastguard Helicopter Services on 14 January 2025.

Mike Kane:... I will turn back to the point made by the hon. Member for Angus and Perthshire Glens (Dave Doogan) on air ambulance provision by NHS Scotland and the Scottish Government. The sector has made an incredible contribution. I am led to understand that there are no current plans for officials to work with the Department of Health and Social Care or the NHS.

[*Official Report*, 14 January 2025; Vol. 760, c. 76WH.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane):

Mike Kane:... I will turn back to the point made by the hon. Member for Angus and Perthshire Glens (Dave Doogan) on air ambulance provision by NHS Scotland and the Scottish Government. The sector has made an incredible contribution. **My officials work closely** with the Department of Health and Social Care **and** the NHS.

Other Correction

OLIVIA BAILEY

Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill

The following extract is from the Second Reading debate on the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill on 10 February 2025.

Olivia Bailey:... Whereas the Conservative party spent nearly £9 million a day on hotels for asylum seekers, we have restarted processing to save the taxpayer £4 billion a year over the next two years, and to end the use of hotels.

[*Official Report*, 10 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 82-83.]

Written correction submitted by the hon. Member for Reading West and Mid Berkshire (Olivia Bailey):

Olivia Bailey:... Whereas the Conservative party spent nearly £9 million a day on hotels for asylum seekers, we have restarted processing to save the taxpayer **£4 billion over the next two years**, and to end the use of hotels.

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Tuesday 18 February 2025**

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