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**HOUSE OF COMMONS**  
**OFFICIAL REPORT**

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

**Monday 24 February 2025**

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# House of Commons

*Monday 24 February 2025*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Speaker's Statement

**Mr Speaker:** Before we begin today's proceedings, I know that the House will wish to join me in acknowledging that today marks the third anniversary of the beginning of Russia's attack on Ukraine. This House has always stood with the people of Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression, as they stand up for their ideals, which underpin a peaceful, stable and democratic world. Our thoughts today are with the people of Ukraine, as well as with our colleagues in the Ukrainian Parliament.

## ROYAL ASSENT

**Mr Speaker:** I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that His Majesty has signified his Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Arbitration Act 2025

Water (Special Measures) Act 2025.

# Oral Answers to Questions

## HOME DEPARTMENT

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

### Consumer Protection: Fraud

1. **David Pinto-Duschinsky** (Hendon) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help protect consumers against fraud. [902835]

**The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis):** Fraud devastates lives, and this Government are determined to meet that challenge head-on, including through the new expanded fraud strategy that we promised in our manifesto. We are working with law enforcement and industry to better protect the public, and we are demanding that the tech companies go further and faster to protect consumers at risk of fraud on their platforms.

**David Pinto-Duschinsky:** Online scams are a cause of particular concern in Hendon. A number of my constituents have been targeted, and one lost £40,000 to an online scam. Many of the scams originate overseas. What discussions has the Minister had with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology about tackling online scams and working with other countries to crack down on scams originating abroad?

**Dan Jarvis:** My hon. Friend raises an important issue, not least that the vast majority of scams are perpetrated by criminal gangs based overseas. We need the support of overseas Governments and agencies and the co-operation

of tech firms to prevent fraud from taking place on their platforms. My noble Friend Lord Hanson will be meeting tech firms next month to confirm what action is being taken. Working across Government, including with partners in DSIT and others, we will not hesitate to take further action where necessary.

**Damian Hinds** (East Hampshire) (Con): It was disappointing to see in the January figures that fraud has risen again after it had been coming down, but I commend the Government for proceeding with the Payment Services (Amendment) Regulations 2024 to slow down payments where there is a reasonable suspicion of fraudulent activity. What effect does the Minister believe that change will make?

**Dan Jarvis:** The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. He is right that the latest statistics show that there were 3.9 million incidents in the year ending September 2024—that is one in 15 people becoming a victim—which demonstrates the urgent need for action. The Government are taking action: the Home Secretary, the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology recently wrote to tech and telecoms companies, urging them to go faster and further on fraud, and we expect them to do so.

### Indefinite Leave to Remain

2. **Mike Wood** (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential merits of extending the qualifying period for indefinite leave to remain. [902836]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Malhotra):** Settlement in the UK is a privilege, not an automatic entitlement. There is already a range of periods of time that people are required to spend in the UK before they qualify for settlement. The number of people granted settlement each year will reflect the number of migrants coming to the UK in earlier years. This Government are determined to bring control to the immigration system and to bring net migration down, and we keep all our policies under review.

**Mike Wood:** There is clearly a cost to doing nothing about the current indefinite leave to remain policy, and a recent Centre for Policy Studies report estimates the net lifetime cost as £234 billion for those expected to be granted ILR over the next five years. What is the Minister's assessment of that cost?

**Seema Malhotra:** I gently say to the hon. Member that the number of settlement grants grew by almost a third in the final year that his party was in government, compared with 2023. We will take absolutely no lessons from the Tory party and a shadow Home Secretary who completely lost control of our borders, allowing net migration to quadruple to a record high of nearly 1 million while the number of dangerous boat crossings soared.

**Ms Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Only refugees whose cases prove that they would be at harm if they returned home are given indefinite leave to remain in this country—30,000 people last year. They will not leave the United Kingdom to return to the bombs and the dictators, but without a route to citizenship they will

find it harder to get a job to support their families, get a mortgage, or have a say in their local communities. Will the Minister meet me, and other MPs who are concerned about the new guidance on naturalisation, to talk about how we can properly support integration in the UK?

**Seema Malhotra:** My hon. Friend will know that, for many generations, refugees who have arrived for resettlement in the UK have been able to apply for British citizenship if they meet the conditions, and that continues to be the case. The UK must always do its bit to support those who are fleeing persecution, but we are also clear that we must do all we can to prevent people from making dangerous boat crossings and risking their lives in the arms of criminal gangs.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Katie Lam** (Weald of Kent) (Con): As we have heard, according to the Centre for Policy Studies, over 800,000 migrants from the past five years could soon claim indefinite leave to remain. In NHS care, benefits, social housing and more, that will cost £234 billion—nearly six years of defence spending, or almost all income tax receipts for a year. Will the Minister commit to extending the qualifying period for ILR, or will she accept that the consequence of her policy is a liability for the public of hundreds of billions of pounds?

**Seema Malhotra:** I am still quite flabbergasted by the questions that the Conservatives ask in the House. Their party saw net migration more than quadruple to record levels. The shadow Minister will know that the Prime Minister has also pledged a White Paper on reducing net migration—that was at the end of last year—and work is under way to consider a range of proposals, including how better to support the integration and employability of refugees.

### Antisocial Behaviour

3. **David Williams** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): What recent progress her Department has made on tackling antisocial behaviour. [902837]

5. **Alice Macdonald** (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): What recent progress her Department has made on tackling antisocial behaviour. [902839]

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper):** May I support you, Mr Speaker, in your words about the people of Ukraine on the third anniversary of the invasion, including those who are here in the UK through the Homes for Ukraine scheme?

Too many communities are blighted by antisocial behaviour, which has increased over the past 10 years while neighbourhood policing was heavily cut. That is why this Government's plan for change means putting neighbourhood police back on the beat in our town centres and communities, and stronger powers in our crime and policing Bill—to be introduced tomorrow—to tackle off-road bikes, repeat offenders and shop theft.

**David Williams:** Mark Porter is a community leader who runs Kidsgrove Ladsanddads. Around 400 young people play football at Birchenwood fields every weekend, yet the football pitches are constantly damaged by

off-road bikes. The same happens at Burslem golf club and across estates such as Mill Hill in Tunstall. What steps will be taken to tackle the impact of off-road parks on communities in Stoke-on-Trent North and Kidsgrove?

**Yvette Cooper:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. Some off-road bikes are a total nightmare and can drive communities up the wall with harassment and intimidation. That is why we are strengthening powers. At the moment, the police must provide repeat warnings before they can take action to seize such bikes; we think that they should be able to seize those antisocial bikes straightaway.

**Alice Macdonald:** Antisocial behaviour comes in a variety of forms. Norfolk police have recently made it a priority to address safety concerns about e-bikes and e-scooters. In just one day, they reportedly seized 12 illegally modified bikes in Norwich. I welcome that crackdown, but speeding e-bikes and e-scooters are a real menace in our city centre. Will the Home Secretary expand on the measures that we will take to tackle speeding and illegally modified e-bikes and e-scooters?

**Yvette Cooper:** My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue, which causes havoc and can be really threatening for people in the local community. That is why we will strengthen the law by supporting the police to take stronger action on off-road bikes, and by introducing respect orders so that we can ban repeat offenders from town centres and tackle the antisocial behaviour that has blighted communities for far too long.

**Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): Antisocial behaviour is a problem not just in our town centres, but in our parks. That is why my constituents are extremely concerned about plans to axe the specialist royal parks policing unit and subsume it into community support teams, given the £450 million shortfall facing the Met police. This means that Bushy Park in my constituency will undoubtedly get less police coverage. What assurances can the Home Secretary give my constituents that they will not see fewer police officers in our communities and our parks?

**Yvette Cooper:** This Government are clear: we need to get more police back on the beat. The number of police community support officers has halved over the past 10 to 15 years, and there has been a big drop in the number of neighbourhood police officers on the beat. That is why next year we are increasing neighbourhood policing, with an additional £200 million of investment. That is part of up to £1.1 billion of additional funding next year for our police forces across the country.

**Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Reform): The Home Secretary will be aware that councils up and down the country have real problems with nuisance tenants creating mayhem, committing crimes and making residents' lives a misery, so does she agree that there should be a "one strike and out" policy for these tenants, and that if they keep creating problems, they should be out and the local authority should have no duty to rehouse them?

**Yvette Cooper:** We need stronger action against antisocial behaviour, whether that involves havoc in town centres, off-road bikes or nuisance neighbours making the community's lives a misery. That is why the Government

are increasing neighbourhood policing and giving the police and local communities much stronger powers to crack down on antisocial behaviour so that we can take back our communities from the vandals, the thieves and those who make others' lives a misery.

**Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald), I find that constituents consistently mention the antisocial use of e-scooters and e-bikes, and I certainly welcome on my constituents' behalf the measures in the crime and policing Bill about seizing such vehicles. Will Ministers talk to the Department for Transport about updating legislation, particularly in relation to e-scooters? Their usage has exploded but legislation has not kept pace.

**Yvette Cooper:** We are working with the Department for Transport. We need to keep communities safe, ensure that proper safety standards are met and tackle antisocial behaviour. I have also seen the work of Staffordshire police, who are using drones to follow riders of dangerous off-road bikes and take action.

**Sir Ashley Fox** (Bridgwater) (Con): Does the Home Secretary agree that it would be easier for the police to tackle antisocial behaviour if they had more support for special constables? The number of special constables has fallen in recent years, particularly since the pandemic. Will she agree to consider amending the Employment Rights Act 1996 to bring special constables within section 50?

**Yvette Cooper:** I agree that special constables can play an important role. Their numbers have dropped by around two thirds over the past 14 years. I think that is damaging, and we want to increase their numbers. We are working with police forces on how best to achieve that so that they can play their part, both on the streets in neighbourhood teams and in supporting other specialist aspects of the police's work.

**Matt Vickers** (Stockton West) (Con): Greater Manchester has one of the highest crime rates in the country, with many suffering as a result of antisocial behaviour, but this weekend we saw police officers knocking on the door of a grandmother because she dared to criticise a Labour councillor for his role in the pensioner-hating WhatsApp scandal. Does the Home Secretary agree that is a waste of police time?

**Yvette Cooper:** The Government have been clear that the focus of policing must be on the neighbourhood crimes that blight our communities. That is why we are increasing neighbourhood policing, because the Conservative party slashed the number of neighbourhood police on the beat and we lost thousands of neighbourhood police in our communities. That is why we are also focusing the police on serious violence. The legislation to be introduced tomorrow will focus on tackling serious violence and dealing with the most serious crimes in our communities—something that the Conservative party, which presided over a 61% increase in shoplifting alone during its last two years in power, failed time and again to do.

#### Domestic Abuse: Gloucester

4. **Alex McIntyre** (Gloucester) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help tackle domestic abuse in Gloucester. [902838]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips):** The Government are determined to tackle the scourge of domestic abuse wherever it is found. That is why we have already announced bold measures to transform the policing response to these devastating crimes. Last week, I am proud to say, we embedded the first domestic abuse specialists in 999 control rooms in five police forces, under Raneem's law, and we plan to equip forces everywhere with the tools they need to crack down on perpetrators and keep victims safe, including in Gloucester.

**Alex McIntyre:** I thank my hon. Friend for her answer, and for all the work she has done over many years to champion victims and survivors of domestic abuse. As she will know, one of the biggest challenges facing survivors and victims in Gloucester is the financial implications of fleeing that abuse. Will she agree to meet me to discuss my 10-minute rule Bill, the Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill, which would introduce safe leave for victims of domestic abuse and violence?

**Jess Phillips:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his kind words, and for his commitment to supporting victims. He will be aware that his private Member's Bill is the responsibility of the Department for Business and Trade, but I would of course be willing to meet him, and the Department, to discuss it.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee.

**Dame Karen Bradley** (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): The recent National Audit Office report on the Government's response to violence against women and girls, which includes domestic abuse, made a number of recommendations. My Committee will be considering that issue, but will the Minister comment on what the Government's response will be to those recommendations, and say how she will ensure that domestic abuse is tackled across the country, including in Gloucester?

**Jess Phillips:** I was waiting for that reference to Gloucester. As the right hon. Lady will know, the NAO report is largely based on the previous Government's period in office, and although it makes clear recommendations, it would be premature of me to comment. However, the strategy to combat violence against women and girls that will be published by this Government in early summer will undoubtedly be looking to the NAO recommendations.

#### Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking

6. **Carolyn Harris** (Neath and Swansea East) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help reduce demand for sex trafficking and sexual exploitation. [902840]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips):** The trafficking of women and girls for sexual exploitation is a horrific crime, and the Government work closely with law enforcement to tackle the drivers of that offending and target prolific perpetrators. That includes through operational intensification initiatives aimed at tackling modern slavery threats. The Online Safety Act 2023 sets



out priority offences, including sexual exploitation and human trafficking offences, and starting from 17 March, in-scope companies must adopt systems and processes to address those offences.

**Carolyn Harris:** I thank the Minister for her response. In 2023 the then Home Affairs Committee recommended that pimping websites be outlawed, but the previous Government took no action, allowing sex traffickers to continue legally to exploit their victims online. I have since been made aware of further online exploitation, with websites allowing men to rate and review the women for whom they are paying for sex, including admissions of trafficking, under-age sex, and rape. Will the Minister share what action this Government will take to protect victims of online sexual exploitation?

**Jess Phillips:** Like my hon. Friend, I am horrified that such practices should be allowed to continue. Online platforms have a duty to assess the risk of illegal harms on their services, with a deadline of 16 March 2025, subject to the codes of practice completing the parliamentary process on 17 March. Online platforms will need to take safety measures set out in the codes of practice, and to use other effective measures to protect users from illegal content such as that of which my hon. Friend speaks. If they fail to do so, they will face significant penalties. As she might imagine, I will be keeping a close eye on that.

**Iqbal Mohamed** (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): What measures is the Minister taking to address the record backlog of court cases in the UK, which, as the chief inspector of the Crown Prosecution Service and Serious Fraud Office has warned, is on target to hit 100,000? In particular, can she comment on the call for changes to be made to the way that court cases are prioritised, which at present is resulting in victims of serious crimes, including sexual trafficking, exploitation and rape, facing years-long waits for trials, while less serious crimes are prioritised ahead in the queue?

**Jess Phillips:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, and I recognise the parlous state of the criminal justice system that we inherited, which has led to some victims of rape and sexual violence waiting for years on end. I note that the shadow Justice Secretary has only just noticed that failing, now that he has the word “shadow” in front of his job title, and even though his Government presided over that failing for a decade. Part of the strategy to tackle violence against women and girls, which I work on in concert with the Ministry of Justice, is about ensuring that that issue is sorted.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister. I have to get through the questions.

**Matt Vickers** (Stockton West) (Con): Fiona from Bradford was failed numerous times by social services and local police after suffering horrific sexual abuse at the hands of gangs of men while in a care home. Bradford's local authority has shamefully sought to block a local inquiry into the issue. In Fiona's own words:

“The Government can't just leave it down to the local councils to decide if they're going to be investigated, they're going to have to enforce it.”

Will the Home Secretary reconsider a statutory inquiry into grooming gangs? If not, how will she guarantee that cases like that can never be allowed to happen again?

**Jess Phillips:** I am working with victims across the country to ensure, as has already been announced, that cold cases like the one referred to by the shadow Minister can be reopened. The Government have invested an extra £2.5 million in the taskforce to ensure that can happen. We will be working with local authorities across the country to ensure that the failures of the past are not repeated.

### Drug Dealing: Rural Communities

7. **Vikki Slade** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): What steps she is taking to help tackle drug dealing in rural communities. [902841]

**The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson):** Through the county lines programme, we continue to target exploitative drug dealing gangs wherever they operate, including in rural areas, as part of our efforts to dismantle the organised crime groups behind that trade. Since the Government took office, the county lines programme has closed over 400 drug lines running across communities in England and Wales. In our manifesto, we committed to going after the gangs that lure young people into violence and crime. At the weekend, we announced that we will create a new offence of child criminal exploitation in the forthcoming crime and policing Bill.

**Vikki Slade:** It is well known that rural and seaside areas are targeted by drug gangs. Escapeline has assessed that up to 70,000 young people, some as young as six, are being trafficked. In my constituency, I have recently dealt with young girls who have been provided with drugs by trusted adults in dance schools, where no action is taken, because those adults are not seen as requiring a Disclosure and Barring Service check, and with vulnerable adults who are being controlled in their homes, where there has been no response at all from local police, because my small towns are simply not seen to be a priority and resources are directed elsewhere. How can I offer reassurance to my communities that their small towns are not being forgotten?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** The hon. Lady makes an important point. Specific resources are available to police forces to be surged into tackling county lines. I know the police force in Dorset, in her area, has applied for that funding in the past, so I encourage her to have a conversation with the police and crime commissioner and chief constable about what more can be done to get that resource into the towns she talks about.

### Police Funding: Gloucestershire

8. **Dr Roz Savage** (South Cotswolds) (LD): If she will increase funding for Gloucestershire constabulary. [902842]

**The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson):** The 2025-26 final police funding settlement provides funding of up to £19.6 billion for

the policing system in England and Wales, which is an increase of £1.1 billion when compared to 2024-25. Of that, Gloucestershire will receive up to £168.2 million, an increase of over £10 million, including £1.5 million to kickstart the recruitment of additional neighbourhood police officers and police community support officers in Gloucestershire.

**Dr Savage:** My constituency straddles two large counties, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire, which both languish near the bottom of the league table of funding for constabularies. Despite the modest rise in funding, those constabularies will have to cut policing numbers, so can the Minister assure my constituents that crimes will be addressed on a timely basis?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** More money is going into policing, particularly around the neighbourhood policing guarantee that this Government promised in their manifesto. We are providing £200 million to kickstart the recruitment of police officers, PCSOs and specials in all our communities. I take the hon. Lady's point about the funding formula and how that affects the two forces that straddle her constituency. We are going into a spending review and I know officials have met representatives from Gloucestershire constabulary to talk about the financial situation. We will keep that under review as we work towards the spending review.

**Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op):** Like Gloucestershire police, Essex police is receiving additional funding this year; in fact, we are getting increased funding of £27 million. Despite that, the front desk at Harlow police station is under threat. Does the Minister agree that given the additional funding, police services in Harlow in Essex should be increasing not decreasing, and that any proposals not to do so are down to historical underfunding by the previous Government?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** I am very pleased that Essex has got that increase in funding. I gently point out that the decisions around how those resources are used are for the police and crime commissioner and the chief constable, but, overall, more than £1.1 billion is going into policing, over and above what the previous Government put in in 2024-25.

### Counter-terrorism

9. **Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab):** What steps her Department is taking with international partners to counter the threat of terrorism. [902843]

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper):** This weekend's horrific attack in Mulhouse in France has again reminded us of the threat from terrorists and from Islamist extremism, which can strike at any time. I have spoken to the French Interior Minister this morning to offer our support and any assistance needed. We will continue to work with our European colleagues and the Five Eyes partnership to tackle these threats, both internationally and here in the UK.

**Peter Prinsley:** Sadly, the misappropriation of religious belief to justify acts of terror and intimidation has become familiar across the world. We have seen the minds of

too many of our young people corrupted by online pedlars of hate, so what action are this Government taking to tackle radicalisation at a time when xenophobia and intolerance are being promoted for political purposes?

**Yvette Cooper:** My hon. Friend is right that terrorists do not speak for any faith. Interfaith relationships are an important part of developing stronger communities, but we are clear that in the Government and across society we have to do more to prevent radicalisation and particularly the growing numbers of young people from being drawn into terrorism—both Islamist extremism and extreme right-wing threats. That is why tomorrow we will introduce new youth diversion orders through our crime and policing Bill to give the police new powers to divert young people away from terrorism.

**Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con):** Although I welcome what the Home Secretary is saying about the need to divert and prevent home-grown terrorism, does she accept that a pattern of terrorism is emerging in continental Europe of undocumented migrants going into countries and committing terrorist acts? Does she agree that it is very difficult for the authorities to prevent anything of that sort if undocumented illegal migrants are released into society when they arrive on these shores?

**Yvette Cooper:** We are clear that we need to tackle extremist and terror threats wheresoever they are found, which includes making sure that we have strengthened border security. That is why we have put forward new counter-terror style powers around people smuggling and trafficking to strengthen our border security, and it is also why we need to tackle particularly the radicalisation we see online. That is where we also see young people being drawn into extremist and terror threats. Wheresoever that is found, we need strong action in place to keep our country safe.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con):** In fighting terrorism, the Security Minister has rightly said that Islamism is the foremost threat we face. Its danger lies not just in physical violence, but in the intolerance it embodies and the intimidation it relies on. Will the Home Secretary give a clear answer to this question? Should it be a criminal offence to desecrate a Koran or any holy text: yes or no?

**Yvette Cooper:** We are clear that the primary domestic terrorist threat comes from Islamist terrorism, which comprises three quarters of the MI5 caseload and 64% of those in custody for terrorism-connected offences. That is followed by extreme right-wing terrorism, which comprises around a quarter of the MI5 caseload. We already have a framework of legislation in place to ensure that we can deal with the dangerous threats to our cohesion and our communities that we face.

### Retail Crime

10. **Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to help reduce shop thefts. [902845]

18. **Sally Jameson** (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment she has made of trends in the level of retail crime. [902854]

**The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson):** In the last year of the previous Government, shop theft reached a record high, and violence and abuse towards retail workers increased to an unacceptable level. This Government will not tolerate these crimes. As a central part of our safer streets mission, we are committed to introducing a new stand-alone offence of assaulting a retail worker and ending the effective immunity for shop theft of goods under £200, because there is no such thing as low-level crime.

**Ruth Cadbury:** I was recently contacted by a constituent who works in a small high street supermarket. He and his colleagues have frequently been violently attacked by shoplifters, so what else can the Minister say about what the Government can do to protect shop workers?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** It is appalling to hear about cases such as the ones in my hon. Friend's constituency. I am very struck—like everyone else across the House, I think—by how commonplace violence and abuse against shop workers has sadly become. The Government have made it absolutely clear that everybody who goes to work has the right to feel safe on the job, and we will not tolerate the criminality that we have seen in recent times. That is why, following years of campaigning from the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers and the Co-op, this Labour Government will finally deliver a stand-alone criminal offence of assaulting a retail worker.

**Sally Jameson:** Shop workers in Doncaster have told me time and again that they are fed up with the amount of shoplifting going on and the antisocial behaviour that goes with it, which includes threats and sometimes physical violence. This kind of crime needs to be crushed. I am pleased to hear that a stand-alone offence of assaulting a retail worker is to be included in the legislation being introduced this week, but will the Minister confirm that the police will have the clout to enforce the law and make sure we eliminate this kind of activity?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. Our commitment to neighbourhood policing and putting the police officers, police community support officers and special constables back into our neighbourhoods—into our communities, high streets and town centres—will enable the police to take the action we all want to see against the antisocial behaviour that my hon. Friend talks about.

**Josh Babarinde** (Eastbourne) (LD): One of the best ways of tackling retail crime and associated antisocial behaviour among young people is through targeted preventive work with at-risk pupils in schools. An example is the guidance and welfare unit at Cavendish school in Eastbourne. That unit was set up by my former headteacher, Mr Fitzpatrick, who is in the Public Gallery today, along with my former head of year, Mrs Fitzpatrick, who is also in the Gallery. Will the Minister join me in congratulating inspirational teachers such as them on their critical safeguarding and prevention work with young people across Eastbourne and beyond?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** I do not want to get into trouble; I would like to congratulate Mr and Mrs Fitzpatrick on the work they have done—we know how important that early preventive work is. That is why this Government are also committed to our prevention partnerships, identifying young people who are on the cusp of getting involved in criminality and diverting them, and putting the resources in to make sure they make much better choices in their lives.

**Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): Harrogate has a wealth of independent stores that attract people to the town from across the region—including shoplifters, unfortunately. I have been speaking with Harrogate business improvement district about what it can do to help tackle shoplifting. It has an increasingly good relationship with North Yorkshire police. What steps is the Minister taking to encourage North Yorkshire police and other police organisations to work with local community and business organisations to crack down on shoplifting?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I visited North Yorkshire last week, and one of the issues there is how well the police are working with communities and the retail sector to start to tackle some of the issues around retail crime. Over the next three years, £7 million will be allocated to support the police to tackle retail crime through the specialist team Opal, which is the national police intelligence unit. That unit is looking at the serious organised criminal gangs that are now involved in retail theft.

### Rural Crime

11. **Leigh Ingham** (Stafford) (Lab): What steps she is taking to reduce rural crime. [902847]

**The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson):** The Government are committed to tackling rural crime. We recognise the devastating consequences it can have on communities and the agricultural sector. Under our reforms, rural areas will be safeguarded through tougher measures to clamp down on antisocial behaviour, to strengthen neighbourhood policing and to take action to prevent fly-tipping.

**Leigh Ingham:** Antisocial behaviour in Tyrley, a small village in my constituency, has had a significant impact on the community. Small rural communities like these often feel overlooked and struggle to have their voices heard when it comes to policing and public safety. Will the Government ensure that rural communities, such as Tyrley, receive the named police officer guarantee, so that they have a dedicated point of contact for policing and for support?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** Yes, and my hon. Friend raises an important point about those small parts of larger rural communities and how they can feel that our neighbourhood policing guarantee will provide them with reassurance. There is the named officer guarantee, and it is worth recognising the use of things such as WhatsApp groups in big rural areas, where intelligence can be fed into the police. That can also be helpful for those communities to feel safe.



**Patrick Spencer** (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): Policing in rural areas is increasingly complex, but rural constabularies receive much less funding than inner-city ones. I know the Minister will jump on this opportunity to complain about the last Government, but will she at least take a moment to commit to publishing the methodology behind the funding formula and open a conversation about fairer funding for rural police forces?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** The hon. Gentleman is right: I am going to say that the funding formula was introduced by the previous Government—I think in 2011. They had two goes at trying to update it, and they did not do anything about it. We have been in government for seven months now, and this is what we have inherited. In a lot of areas, we have inherited things that we would not necessarily have wanted to have inherited. As I have said before to the House, we will be looking at police reform going forward, and part of that conversation will be around financial issues.

### Asylum Seekers: Hotels

12. **Tom Hayes** (Bournemouth East) (Lab): What steps she is taking to reduce the use of hotels to house asylum seekers. [902848]

14. **Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): What steps she is taking to reduce the number of people living in asylum hotels. [902850]

**The Minister for Border Security and Asylum (Dame Angela Eagle):** We are continuing to reduce the use of asylum hotels from the peak, which was reached under the previous Government, when more than 400 hotels were in use across the country at a cost of £9 million every day. We are determined to end the use of hotels over time as part of our wider objective to cut the costs of asylum accommodation and restore order to our immigration system.

**Tom Hayes:** Asylum seekers are forced to live in limbo. Bournemouth hotels cost the taxpayer eye-watering sums, as we just heard, and everyone is stuck in a situation that nobody wants. I have written to Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole council to express opposition to additional asylum hotels in my constituency. Will the Minister outline how the Home Office has reallocated resources following the election to speed up the closure of hotels and the processing of asylum applications, to turn a page on 14 years of Conservative failure?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** We are determined to end hotel usage as part of our objective to cut the costs of asylum accommodation. A key element of that is clearing the asylum backlog and increasing returns, so that the system operates swiftly, firmly and fairly.

**Simon Hoare:** I am afraid that determination will not quite cut it, will it? Pensioners in North Dorset who have been deprived of their winter fuel allowance and farmers who have been hit by and are now facing a massive tax burden will want to know how the Minister will reduce the cost of asylum hotels, which is, as she says, eye-wateringly high. The action and her words are not apparently matching.

**Dame Angela Eagle:** We have to deal with the chaotic system that we inherited from the Conservatives. We are doing that in various ways. One of the big things that we are trying to do is speed up the system and end the backlog so that we can get people out of hotels.

### Phone Theft

13. **Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): What steps she is taking to tackle phone theft. [902849]

**The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson):** The Government are determined to act to ensure that people feel safe on our streets. On 6 February the Home Secretary brought together law enforcement agencies and representatives of the mobile phone industry to discuss what more could be done to break the business model of mobile phone theft, and to bring about stronger collaboration across those agencies to crack down on the criminal networks that are operating in this trade.

**Gregory Stafford:** In earlier times mobile phone theft was seen as an urban issue, but as has been evidenced by my postbag over the last couple of weeks, it is increasing in our rural towns and villages. What discussions is the Minister having with her colleagues in the Ministry of Justice to ensure that repeat perpetrators of this crime face custodial sentences?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** While there is a concentration of phone thefts in the Metropolitan police area in particular, it is important to note that they are happening around the country, and it is being suggested that the good practice used by those who are starting to tackle the problem, notably the West Midlands police force, should be spread to all forces. The taskforce that I mentioned earlier in connection with a summit will meet again in three months, and I will certainly speak to my colleagues at the Ministry of Justice about the issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised.

### Hostile State Threats

16. **Mark Swards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to counter hostile state threats. [902852]

**The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis):** The Home Office works closely with other Departments and operational agencies to strengthen the UK's defences against state threats. That includes continuing to implement measures in the National Security Act 2023, which will make the UK a harder target for states that seek to commit hostile acts.

**Mark Swards:** Hostile states are using unknowing security officials here in the UK to undermine our national security and conceal their activities, and the director general of MI5 has said that Russia and Iran are increasingly using this tactic. I welcome the Home Office guidance that allows security organisations to carry out effective due diligence, but what else is the Department doing, with the security industry, to ensure that our country is protected from these hostile state threats?

**Dan Jarvis:** I thank my hon. Friend not just for his question but for mentioning the recent Home Office guidance, which was a crucial first step in upskilling security officials on the risks that they might encounter from state actors. We are following that up with targeted engagement events across the sector, including upcoming industry conferences which we will be attending to ensure that the key messages are well understood and we can have an ongoing dialogue with the sector about the handling of such threats.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): When considering hostile state threats, we cannot ignore terrorist groups from both the right and the left in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland who work with some of those states. What is being done to ensure that paramilitary groups across the United Kingdom are taken on, and that the hostile states they represent on the basis of their own motivations can be addressed directly?

**Dan Jarvis:** The hon. Gentleman has made an important point, as he always does. I can say to him that a threat is a threat, regardless of the direction from which it comes. We take all those threats extremely seriously, and we work around the clock with the police and the operational agencies to keep the public safe, wherever the threat may originate.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Lisa Smart** (Hazel Grove) (LD): Strong encryption is vital for everyone's security, but last week Apple pulled its advanced data protection services in the UK after the Home Office had reportedly demanded back-door access to its UK customers' encrypted data. Liberal Democrats have long argued that investigatory powers must be proportionate, as any "way in" for security services can be exploited by criminal gangs or, indeed, hostile states to target innocent people. Given that rights and security go hand in hand, what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that our national security and civil liberties are properly protected? Why do the Government believe that Apple's UK customers do not deserve the same privacy rights as every other customer in the rest of the world?

**Dan Jarvis:** I hope the hon. Lady will understand that I cannot comment on operational matters, and it would not be appropriate for me either to confirm or to deny the existence of any notices under the Investigatory Powers Act 2016. This is a long-standing position held by successive Governments for obvious reasons of national security. What I can say is that the suggestion that privacy and security are at odds is not correct; we can and must have both. The Investigatory Powers Act contains robust safeguards and independent oversight to protect privacy and ensure that data is obtained only on an exceptional basis, and only when it is necessary and proportionate to do so.

### Topical Questions

T1. [902860] **Greg Smith** (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Home Secretary.

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper):** Thank you, Mr Speaker.

"My son didn't stand a chance."

Those were the heartbreaking words of Pooja Kanda, whose teenage son Ronan was fatally stabbed in 2022. His teenage killers were able to buy multiple dangerous weapons online, without any proper checks. Following Pooja's campaigning, we are introducing Ronan's law, which includes tightening the rules for online retailers, increasing the maximum penalty for selling weapons to under-18s, and introducing much more stringent ID checks at the point of purchase and delivery. I thank Commander Stephen Clayman for his crucial review in this area, which underpins the reforms, and pay tribute to the Kanda family. We need to do everything in our power to prevent other families from suffering from terrible knife crime.

**Greg Smith:** Thames Valley police are £1.9 million down this year because of the flawed formula for distributing funds to police forces after a pay award is given. When will this historical anomaly be fixed?

**Yvette Cooper:** I will just point out to the hon. Gentleman that his party had 14 years to address all the things he is so concerned about now. This Government have increased funding for policing by up to £1.1 billion next year, including £200 million to start redressing the huge cuts in neighbourhood policing that we have seen on our streets in Thames Valley and right across the country, because we need to get police back on the streets.

T2. [902861] **Emily Darlington** (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her previous answers, and for her commitment to reducing the number of asylum claimants in the UK. As she will know, the UK is spending 27% of its official development assistance on housing asylum claimants—almost double the OECD average. Our overseas spend was cut by the previous Government. Does she agree that in order to reduce the number of claimants coming to the UK, the Government should increase the spend on building peace and security abroad?

**The Minister for Border Security and Asylum (Dame Angela Eagle):** My hon. Friend is right to say that asylum costs make up the bulk of Home Office spend classified as ODA spending and that we are committed to reducing them, including by ending the use of hotels, which will mean that we can return that ODA resource so that it can be used upstream to prevent migratory flows from happening in the first place.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Home Secretary.

**Chris Philp** (Croydon South) (Con): Border security is fundamental, but between the July election and yesterday, 25,135 people illegally and dangerously crossed the English channel—a 28% increase on the same period 12 months earlier. Does the Home Secretary now regret ignoring the National Crime Agency's advice that law enforcement alone is not enough and that a removals deterrent is needed?

**Yvette Cooper:** I will just point out to the shadow Home Secretary that when the Conservatives were in government, we saw that many people arrive in the space of just over 100 days, because they completely lost control of our

borders and let criminal gangs take hold along the channel. Some 84,000 people arrived in small boats while the Rwanda policy that he somehow wants to reintroduce managed to send just four volunteers. We have increased returns by over 20% to 19,000, which is important. I hope he will explain why he voted against counter-terrorism powers to go after smuggler gangs.

**Chris Philp:** The Home Secretary talks about the Rwanda scheme. Of course, it never even started, as she well knows. The first flight was due to take off after the election, but she cancelled it.

She mentions that returns have gone up. What she fails to mention is that the vast majority of those people did not enter the country by small boat. The number of small boat returns went down after this Government came into office, and it represents only 4% of people crossing the English channel. Does she really think that letting 96% of illegal immigrants stay here is going to deter anybody?

**Yvette Cooper:** I just say to the shadow Home Secretary that the Rwanda scheme ran for two years. It was running for two years—

**Chris Philp:** It never started.

**Yvette Cooper:** Exactly! All they managed to do—

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Please, let us show a little bit more restraint, and when you ask a question, at least wait for the answer.

**Yvette Cooper:** The scheme ran for two years, and the Conservatives spent £700 million of taxpayers' money to return just four people. In the period during which the shadow Home Secretary was in the Government, 128,000 people arrived on small boats, and only a tiny percentage of them were ever returned, even though that number included 12,000 Albanians. This Government are having to sort out this chaos, but his party is again failing to support counter-terrorism powers against smuggler and trafficking gangs—siding with the criminal smuggler gangs instead of the people of Britain.

T5. [902864] **Tracy Gilbert** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): It is illegal to post a prostitution advert in a phone box, yet the very same advert can be freely posted online by a pimping website. Such websites are making it as easy to order a woman to exploit as it is to order a takeaway. Does the Minister agree that we must urgently update our anti-pimping laws to make it a criminal offence to enable or to profit from the prostitution of another person online or offline?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips):** I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important point. The Government are clear that online platforms are a significant enabler of sexual exploitation, and must be responsible and held accountable for the content of their sites, including taking proactive steps to prevent their sites being used by criminals. We are implementing the Online Safety Act 2023, which sets out priority offences, including sexual exploitation and human trafficking.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrats spokesperson.

**Lisa Smart** (Hazel Grove) (LD): On a recent visit to Marple sixth-form college, I was reminded that the last Conservative Government abandoned young people and our economy by trashing our relationship with Europe, so I was delighted to see recent reports in *The Times* that the Prime Minister will offer a youth mobility scheme in negotiations with the EU. This is a common-sense approach that will give our young people opportunities and help grow our economy. Will the Secretary of State support delivering the best possible deal for young people here in the UK by extending a youth mobility scheme to the EU?

**Yvette Cooper:** As the Front-Bench spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats knows, that is not our plan, and we are clear that net migration needs to come down. It quadrupled under the previous Conservative Government in the space of just four years, and that number needs to come down. We believe we should support young people across this country, including through youth prevention partnerships.

T6. [902865] **Deirdre Costigan** (Ealing Southall) (Lab): Exactly two weeks ago today, Dariusz Serafin tragically died from a knife wound on the streets of West Ealing—on a road long blighted by antisocial behaviour, about which I had written to the police just the week before. How will the Government's new respect orders and the crackdown on knives help bring reassurance to my constituents in West Ealing?

**The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson):** I am very sorry to hear about the incident to which my hon. Friend refers. She will know that we have a commitment to halve knife crime over the next decade. We have already introduced the ban on zombie knives and machetes, and we are moving forward with the ban on ninja swords. Last week, the Home Secretary announced the new measures under Ronan's law to tighten the lethal loopholes in the online sale of knives, and we are developing the Young Futures programme, with prevention partnerships at their heart, to stop young people getting involved in knife crime.

T4. [902863] **Graham Leadbitter** (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): My constituent Kia McNicoll is a mother of four children, and her three-year-old, Patryk, was recently diagnosed with cancer. Kia's mother-in-law recently applied for a visa extension so that she can help the family with childcare through these most horrific of circumstances, but her application was rejected. Forgive me, Mr Speaker, but I cannot tell the difference between this Labour Government and the Tories who came before them. Will the Minister commit to looking at this application again, so that my constituent can focus on what matters most: the health of her son?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Malhotra):** I thank the hon. Member for his question, and if he wants to write to me about that case, I will be very happy to look at it.

T7. [902866] **Alex Mayer** (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): Eenie and Meenie, two white cats from Stanbridge, were recently shot and killed. Could the Minister outline what discussions she has had with local police to that ensure that these crimes are properly investigated and that the law is upheld?



**Dame Diana Johnson:** The abuse of animals using weapons of any type is an incredibly serious matter, and there are such provisions in the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, the Wild Mammals (Protection) Act 1996 and the Animal Welfare Act 2006. There is a range of offences, and I encourage anyone who witnesses this kind of event to report it to the police. I will certainly discuss what more we can do with my colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

**Helen Maguire** (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Many of my constituents have raised concerns about e-bikes and e-scooters being a safety hazard when modified or misused. What is the Minister doing to tackle riders travelling at high speeds on pavements and other pedestrian areas, and help my constituents to feel safe on their streets again?

**Yvette Cooper:** I can reassure the hon. Member that dangerous and antisocial behaviour involving e-bikes will be covered by the legislation we are introducing tomorrow to tackle vehicles and off-road bikes used in antisocial behaviour, so that we can keep streets and communities safe.

T8. [902867] **Matthew Patrick** (Wirral West) (Lab): Antisocial behaviour is too common on the Wirral and it ruins lives. This morning I spoke to my constituent Henry, who told me that having groups of youths hanging outside, intimidating and damaging property, made him feel like a prisoner in his own home. What more can be done to tackle such abuse and to support victims?

**Yvette Cooper:** My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. Too often antisocial behaviour is dismissed as a low-level crime, yet it can make people's lives a complete misery. That is why we need more neighbourhood police back on our streets, working in communities to prevent and tackle the kinds of problems that communities face.

**Blake Stephenson** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): The Prime Minister recently said he was:

“hardwiring growth into all the decisions of the Cabinet”.

How did he react when the Home Secretary told him that her policy on electronic travel authorisations would cost the economy nearly £735 million over five years?

**Seema Malhotra:** We are introducing electronic travel authorisations in line with the approach of our international partners such as Australia and the USA, who have also been looking at how to enhance their ability to pre-screen travellers upstream, to stop those who pose a threat from travelling to the UK. As the former immigration Minister and now shadow Secretary of State of Justice, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), said at the time:

“ETAs will enhance our border security by increasing our knowledge about those seeking to come to the UK and preventing the arrival of those who pose a threat.”

If the hon. Gentleman disagrees with him, I suggest they have a catch-up. Perhaps the Conservative party will have worked out by then where it stands on the policy.

T9. [902868] **Joe Powell** (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): In recent years, the UK has slid down the international league table on tackling corruption. Given the threat of corruption to our democracy, economy

and national security, will the Minister say whether the Government intend to publish a new comprehensive anti-corruption strategy?

**The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis):** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the work he does on the all-party parliamentary group on anti-corruption and responsible tax. I can confirm that the Government take the threat of corruption, illicit finance and kleptocracy extremely seriously, which is why we announced that we will publish a new UK anti-corruption strategy this year. The new strategy will include measures that make it harder for corrupt actors to operate, strengthen global resilience to corruption, and address the UK's vulnerabilities to corruption, including through ways to ensure that all those in public service are held to the highest standards.

**Mr James Cleverly** (Braintree) (Con): The Home Secretary knows that raising the minimum income threshold has reduced net migration, which is why I introduced it while I was Home Secretary. If the Home Secretary wants to continue bringing net migration down, will she now confirm that she will introduce the further increases to the threshold, as I proposed?

**Yvette Cooper:** Net migration quadrupled during the period when the former Home Secretary was in government, in the space of just four years—the most shocking loss of control of our borders. We saw visas and overseas recruitment shoot up at exactly the same time as training here in the UK fell. That is why this Government will publish a White Paper that sets out measures to reduce net migration, including by ensuring that employers recruit and train here in the UK.

T10. [902869] **Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): On Friday night, I joined Bedfordshire police officers on a ride-a-long to see first hand the great work they do to help vulnerable people. However, the Policing Minister knows that Bedfordshire police rely heavily on specific grants to tackle serious, violent and organised crime. Will she confirm that those grants will continue, and when we might we hear about that?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** I visited Bedfordshire police before Christmas, and I agree that it is an excellent force. Decisions around funding will be made in due course.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Refugees here from Ukraine under the Homes for Ukraine scheme are not eligible to indefinite leave. They have a three-year visa, which in many cases, obviously, is about to expire. They have a very short window to apply for what is only an 18-month extension. Does the Home Secretary agree that that is not long enough for Ukrainian families here to be able to plan their future, and will she reconsider?

**Yvette Cooper:** I can say to the hon. Gentleman that we continue to support the Homes for Ukraine scheme, which remains extremely important—I have a family from Ukraine still living with me in Yorkshire. We will continue to support those families and will ensure that people are not disadvantaged by the deadlines that have been set.



**Tristan Osborne** (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): Challenging violence against women and girls is an absolutely critical mission of this Government. What work is the Minister doing with the Department for Education to promote positive role models in our schools and further education colleges?

**Jess Phillips:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I am literally about to go into a cross-Government ministerial meeting with the Department for Education about exactly that. Our violence against women and girls strategy will not succeed without prevention through education.

**Nick Timothy** (West Suffolk) (Con): The Home Secretary quite conspicuously failed to answer the question that my hon. Friend the Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam) asked earlier, so I am going to have another go. Should it ever be a criminal offence for anybody to desecrate a religious text—yes or no?

**Yvette Cooper:** The hon. Gentleman will know that we do not have a blasphemy law in this country, nor will we have one.

**Chris Webb** (Blackpool South) (Lab): Three weeks ago, I met a nine-year-old boy in Blackpool's asylum hotel. He cannot walk, has frequent seizures and is non-verbal. Since May last year, his family have been requesting a wheelchair, as they have to carry him everywhere they go. No child, especially one with these needs, should have to go without the equipment that gives them the dignity to live. Does the Minister agree that such hotels are unsuitable for vulnerable children, and will she personally intervene to help me to get this young lad a wheelchair?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this matter to my attention. My officials have investigated, and Serco has referred the case to healthcare partners, who are currently in the process of providing a suitable wheelchair following a thorough assessment of the child's needs. Officials are monitoring the situation closely to ensure the family receive the support they require.

**Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): Domestic abuse services in my area are telling me there is a specific shortage of places in shelters for men, which is a particular problem for women fleeing domestic abuse with their teenage sons. What is being done to address this problem specifically?

**Jess Phillips:** Refuge accommodation actually sits within the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. However, we have invested £30 million extra for councils to look at the need they have in their

area, which will include creating dispersal accommodation, as women with older boys are often not allowed into group accommodation.

**Luke Murphy** (Basingstoke) (Lab): Last week, I held a summit with local businesses in the Top of Town in Basingstoke to discuss how we can breathe new life into our town centre. One of the key messages was that persistent antisocial behaviour is making residents feel unsafe and creating a barrier to businesses thriving. What reassurances can the Home Secretary give businesses and constituents in Basingstoke that this Government are making progress in restoring town centre patrols?

**Yvette Cooper:** My hon. Friend is right to raise this matter, for both Basingstoke and towns right across the country. Town centres were blighted by a 60% increase in shop theft in the two years before the election, as well as antisocial behaviour. That is why tackling town centre crime will be at the heart of the crime and policing Bill, introduced tomorrow.

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Does the Home Secretary agree that it would be a better use of Greater Manchester police officers' time if they actually policed the streets and prevented crime, rather than visiting grandmothers' homes to discuss a Facebook post?

**Yvette Cooper:** Perhaps the hon. Gentleman missed the discussion on this earlier. We have been clear that the central priority for policing set by this Government is neighbourhood policing, to tackle town centre crime, challenges across the country and serious violence, including violence against women and girls and the knife crime devastating young lives. We have made those priorities clear to police forces right across the country as part of our policing reform and our new legislation.

**Mr Speaker:** For the final question, Jonathan Brash.

**Mr Jonathan Brash** (Hartlepool) (Lab): Dispersal accommodation for asylum is unevenly distributed across the country. In Hartlepool, we support 50 asylum seekers per 10,000 in the population, yet a few miles up the road, the neighbouring local authority supports seven per 10,000, with local authorities elsewhere in the country hosting none. Does the Minister agree that this is unfair, and that, as we bring the numbers down, we must evenly distribute support for asylum seekers across the areas?

**Dame Angela Eagle:** We did inherit a very uneven distribution—if I could put it that way—of dispersed accommodation, often in poorer areas where, its presence puts more pressure on local communities. It is not a situation that we would have wanted, and we want to remedy it over time.

## Plant Oxford Site

3.40 pm

**Greg Smith** (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business and Trade if we will make a statement on the Plant Oxford site.

**The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones)**: This Government are determined to see a strong, thriving UK automotive industry. We recognise the vital role that the British motor industry plays within our manufacturing landscape, employing more than 150,000 people, with tens of thousands more working in the wider supply chain. That is why we are ploughing £2 billion into the sector's green transition and £300 million to encourage the uptake of new, clean, green electric vehicles—a big incentive for the global automotive sector to invest in the UK. Building on this momentum, our modern industrial strategy will back automotive companies that want to invest in Britain and drive long-term sustainable UK growth.

BMW has taken a commercial decision to delay the production of two new electric Mini models at its Oxford plant. Undoubtedly, that news will be unsettling for the company's many hard-working employees, not least those working directly on the production line, but I must stress that BMW remains committed to its investment in the UK. It is by no means unusual for a manufacturer to adjust its product line-up or production start dates for commercial reasons.

We are proud that BMW considers Oxford to be at the heart of Mini production. As a Government, we are throwing our weight behind its investment. We want big automotive brands from Britain and around the world to lie at the heart of our growth mission and plan for change, creating well-paid jobs and putting more money into people's pockets. As part of that effort, this Government are working closely with BMW as it reviews its investment timelines, ensuring that more cars are built right here in the United Kingdom.

**Greg Smith**: I draw attention to my entry in the register of interests. I expected the Secretary of State to hide from talk of CVs, but it seems that also applies to EVs. This weekend we saw the disastrous consequences of Labour's rigid approach to net zero: BMW hitting the brakes on a £600 million investment in Plant Oxford. That deal, from 2023, would have secured 4,000 high-quality jobs and was a strong vote of confidence in the UK. Like other deals, it was possible only because the previous Government were willing to be pragmatic. The Conservatives made the sensible decision to delay the ban on internal combustion engine cars, bringing the UK into line with major global economies such as France, Germany, Sweden and Canada, but Labour said it knew better, restoring the 2030 phase-out date in its manifesto.

When the negative impacts of that approach became clear, the Government launched a fast-track consultation on the zero emission vehicle mandate, pitifully attempting to buy themselves time. Surely, no consultation is necessary. The effects of their puritanical ZEV obsession is already clear: Jaguar Land Rover says that the ZEV mandate is causing disruption to the market; Vauxhall has confirmed that it will shut down its Luton factory, citing the ZEV

mandate as making the plant less economically viable; and now the future of Plant Oxford—the home of the Mini since 1959—is uncertain.

Labour's reckless policies have shattered industry confidence, with consumer demand for EVs dropping off a cliff and numbers only just about sustained by subsidised fleet sales. Will the Minister do the right thing: stop hiding behind consultations and acknowledge that the Government's ideological approach to net zero will lead only to economic disaster for our automotive sector and consumers alike?

**Sarah Jones**: It is hard to know where to start. The “puritanical ZEV obsession” was, as the hon. Gentleman knows, a Conservative policy from the last Government. The only changes made to that policy under the last Prime Minister dampened demand by changing the deadline, and hampered manufacturers by not ensuring flexibility or pragmatism in how the policy operated—it was the worst of both worlds.

By contrast, Labour and the Government are acting with pragmatism. We are listening to industry and working at pace to get this right. We are also creating the conditions in which the automotive industry can thrive. That means delivering not just the economic and political stability so lacking under the previous Government, but an industrial strategy that will deliver growth, including in the automotive industry; investing £2 billion in automotive transition through the Budget; investing in research and development; supporting and talking to our industries; and understanding the global climate.

It was really clear in BMW's statement that there were macroeconomic global and commercial reasons why the decision to delay was made, but BMW is clear that it is still committed to this investment in the UK. I have talked to my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), who is liaising closely with workers and unions, as would be expected. We will continue to work to ensure the right economic and political climate, so that these industries can grow.

**Sonia Kumar** (Dudley) (Lab): Will the Minister update the House on progress on the industrial strategy for the automotive industry? How will that support supply chains in places like Dudley and across the west midlands?

**Sarah Jones**: We are working at pace on delivering the industrial strategy in the spring. There are 150,000 good jobs in the automotive industry, and we want to see those jobs grow. We have identified eight growth sectors that the industrial strategy will turbocharge. Advanced manufacturing is one of them, and that of course includes the auto industry. We have £2 billion of investment, committed at the Budget, to underpin that. We are also working in the industrial strategy on identifying any barriers to growth, so that we can ensure that the sector grows in the years to come.

The industrial strategy will give the stability that we need over the long term—over five and 10 years. It will look at the policy levers that we can control to ensure that businesses continue to want to invest in the UK. PwC has just ranked the UK the second-best place in the world to invest, so I think the future is positive.

**Mr Speaker**: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): This is yet another failure in the Government's main aim of getting Britain growing again. Zero-emission vehicles are too expensive and, it appears, too hard to manufacture in the UK. That forces us into an unfortunate reality in which we are reliant on Elon Musk for our supply of EVs, and are funnelling money into his already very deep pockets, rather than promoting a productive domestic market with good jobs. We need to show ambition and make it easier for ordinary families to buy EVs. What measures will the Government take to support and encourage consumer demand for electric vehicles?

**Sarah Jones:** The hon. Gentleman talks about the Government's policies for growing the economy. A few months ago, we held an international investment summit, at which £63 billion of investment was announced. As I have mentioned, there was £2 billion announced in the Budget for the automotive industry. Interest rates have been cut three times, wages are up, and more than 70,000 jobs have been secured in the UK since the Government came to power. The International Monetary Fund and the OECD predict that the UK will be Europe's fastest-growing economy over the next few years. The industrial strategy was scrapped under the last Government; our industrial strategy will be the backbone of ensuring that we deliver growth.<sup>1</sup>

The hon. Gentleman asked what we were doing. I have already set out the stability, investment and reform that we are bringing to the sector to make sure that it can thrive. Hundreds of thousands of people rely on the automotive industry through their work in it, or in its supply chains. Those are good, well-paid jobs, and we are absolutely determined to ensure that the sector grows.

**Antonia Bance** (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): The Minister has set out how we delivered £2 billion-worth of support for the automotive sector in the Budget. That support is both for manufacturing and for the crucial supply chains in places such as my Black Country constituency and Oxford. Is she able to set out any further details about how that money will be used to support our brilliant manufacturing?

**Sarah Jones:** I thank my hon. Friend for her question, and for her support for the industry, which is so important. Through the £2 billion funding, the automotive transformation fund, the exceptional regional growth fund and the advanced propulsion centre research and development fund, we have found innovative ways of supporting the industry. In January, I was pleased to hear Jatco, a company that makes transmissions for Nissan, announce that it would put its first manufacturing plant in Europe here in the UK; it is converting an old hospital building with a £50 million investment. That plant will be at the international advanced manufacturing park in Sunderland. That is the kind of opportunity that we want to create and deliver.

**Sir Gavin Williamson** (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): Jaguar Land Rover, which has its engine manufacturing centre based in Staffordshire, is a vital employer for people not just in Staffordshire, but right across the west midlands. That plant is pioneering the development of electric vehicles for JLR. What additional support and flexibility will there be from the Government to ensure that Great British brands continue to prosper in the west midlands?

**Sarah Jones:** The right hon. Gentleman is right to talk about Great British brands. We have some incredible small car manufacturers, as well as larger ones, in the UK, and there is great diversity of provision. We are supporting the development of gigafactories in the UK, so that we can make the batteries that we need. We are helping with R&D and innovation to make our cars more sophisticated and efficient, and supporting the large manufacturers to ensure that the conditions are right for them to develop in the UK. We are doing all those things through our industrial strategy and our automotive strategy. I work with the Automotive Council; we met just a couple of weeks ago to talk about the vibrant future that we see for automobiles in the UK. I am always happy to talk to JLR about its plans, and have done so several times.

**Perran Moon** (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): I know that the shadow Minister struggles with the dynamics of the automotive industry, but for the last 20 years, 50% of new vehicle sales have been fleet and business sales. Does the Minister agree that the decision taken today is a commercial decision, based around the structure of BMW's dealer network, as opposed to an obsession with petrol and diesel vehicles?

**Sarah Jones:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that this is a commercial decision. As he would expect, we are talking to representatives of BMW; my officials were with them in Munich a couple of weeks ago, and I have met the UK managing director several times. We are talking to them to support the commercial decisions that they need to make. They have made it clear that there were macroeconomic, global and commercial reasons for the delay that has been announced; such delays are not uncommon. I know that BMW remains committed to this investment in the UK.

**Calum Miller** (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): More than 300 employees at the BMW plant in Oxford live in my constituency, and this morning I met plant convenors from the Unite union to discuss the impact that the uncertainty at the plant is having on those workers and their families. Can the Minister outline exactly how the new industrial strategy will help the plant to become more competitive, in the face of severe competition from other BMW plants in the EU, the US and China?

**Sarah Jones:** The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the concern that I suspect those employees feel. They have known about this change since last year. There are 3,500 people who work in the Oxford plant and many more who work at Rolls-Royce, which is owned by BMW, and in other parts of the UK. Through the industrial strategy, we are looking at a number of issues that we will use the £2 billion for, and we will use the powers that we have. Skills, energy costs and access to finance are all issues that we are having lots of conversations about, as well as the transition to electric vehicles. We are making sure that the flight path for investment in the UK is as good as possible, and that those who are already investing in the UK continue to do so. BMW has announced a £300 million investment in Rolls-Royce, which it owns. It remains committed to this investment in the UK, but I appreciate that there will be concerns among the workers to whom the hon. Gentleman has been talking, and I am always happy to meet people to discuss these matters in more detail.

1.[*Official Report*, 3 March 2025; Vol. 763, c. 1WC.](Correction)



**Jessica Morden** (Newport East) (Lab): Tata's Llanwern steelworks in my constituency produces world-class automotive steel. The Minister has acknowledged the importance of the automotive sector. Will she also acknowledge the importance of having a strong steel industry, and of plants like Llanwern making steel for EVs, and put that at the heart of the forthcoming industrial strategy—a strategy that the Conservatives never had?

**Sarah Jones:** I am glad that my hon. Friend has managed, as ever, to bring steel into the debate. It is incredibly important, and that is why we will have a separate steel strategy, on top of the work that we are doing in the industrial strategy to ensure a thriving sector in the future. That will look at all the issues that we are grappling with and that she knows about, including the transition, energy prices, access to finance, access to grid connections and scrap. We will continue to ensure that the UK's six steel producers can thrive and bring in new business.

**Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): In answer to the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith), the Minister stated that the strategy is resulting in people wanting to invest in the United Kingdom. The sad fact is that as a result of the mad net zero policies that this Government are following, we are losing investment every week; this is yet another example. Does the Minister not follow the logic? If we punish people for not wanting the cars that we produce, the companies will cut back production and jobs, consumers will not get what they want, and economic growth will be affected. When will this Government come to the conclusion that this policy of net zero and punishing people is wrong?

**Sarah Jones:** I do not know if the right hon. Gentleman saw that the CBI brought out figures over the weekend showing that the net zero economy grew by 10% last year, which is significantly more than the economy as a whole. We are absolutely right to transition to electric vehicles, so that we can stick to our commitments on climate change. We are being pragmatic in how we do that. We are not following the same policy as the previous Government, because we are talking to industry and consulting. We will publish the results of the

consultation on how the flexibilities within the transition are working, and whether we need to change them in any way.

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): The British car industry was thriving until the Conservative party introduced net stupid zero, and now we have another car plant at risk; another business struggling and losing hundreds of millions of pounds; and hundreds more British jobs at risk. Does the Minister agree that the automotive industry in the UK will continue to decline until we scrap net zero?

**Sarah Jones:** Here we go with the same old lines. The hon. Gentleman tells us that net zero is a massive con, yet he owns a company that is investing in electric car charging ports. I rest my case.

**Mr Speaker:** On that well-known BMW plant in Strangford, I call Jim Shannon.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister has a real interest in the matters for which she has ministerial responsibility; I want to put on the record my thanks to her. When we have had meetings on other issues relating to Northern Ireland, she has been anxious to help and support me, and I appreciate that.

The decision not to go ahead with the EV production is disappointing to say the least, but it perhaps indicates a wider issue that we face in the manufacturing industry due to rising costs. What can the Minister do to help companies attract more investment through lower energy costs, and what can the Government do to ensure that British jobs are not sent to China, and to ensure that firms that choose to relocate jobs understand that no future help will be forthcoming?

**Sarah Jones:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. I should be clear for the House that the decision has not been made to not go ahead; this is a delay and a change in timing. BMW is committed to going ahead with the investment. At the moment, its e-Mini is being produced in China. This investment will bring it here to the UK.<sup>1</sup> Lots must be done in terms of energy prices, as he says. Building a gigafactory means significant reductions in energy prices, but the wider manufacturing sector is talking to us virtually every day about these kinds of issues. Through the industrial strategy and the reforms that we want to bring in, and by spending the £2 billion that we were allocated in the Budget, we hope to deliver a thriving automotive industry well into the future.

1.[Official Report, 3 March 2025; Vol. 763, c. 2WC.](Correction)



## Ukraine

4 pm

**The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy):** With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on Ukraine.

In January 2022, I visited the Wall of Remembrance of the Fallen in Kyiv with my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary. Seeing the faces of all those who had lost their lives since 2014 brought home the human cost of Kremlin imperialism—and of the Ukrainian determination to stand up to it. Indeed, some weeks later, just as British and American intelligence services had warned, we awoke to news of Putin's full-scale invasion, launched to shatter the sovereign state of Ukraine.

Today, we mark three years of Ukrainian courage in resisting that brutal, illegal and unprovoked invasion. I have witnessed their fortitude at first hand in three visits to Kyiv over the past year—their defiant blitz spirit as Russian missiles and drones rain down night after night after night. On this grim anniversary, amid all the talk about talks, we must not forget that Russia's barbaric war goes on, that the Ukrainian people are suffering, and that, beyond Europe, the conflict is piling pressure on the world's poorest, too.

This debate takes place against the backdrop of intense diplomatic efforts, responding of course to President Trump's call to bring this war to a swift end. At the G20 in South Africa last week, I listened to Sergey Lavrov. Once again, he shamelessly played the victim, rehashing the same old lies. I will say to the House what I said in response: if Russia is serious about a lasting peace that respects Ukraine's sovereignty, Ukraine's independence and the United Nations charter; guarantees Ukraine's security against future aggression; and rejects imperialism, then Britain will listen. No one wants that more than Ukraine.

At the Munich security conference, I underlined that Ukraine must be at the heart of any talks about Ukraine's future, and I said that the west must learn from our history. Vladimir Putin and his war are no historical aberration. He draws on a tsarist tradition—the imperialism and authoritarianism of Peter the Great or Nicholas I—and a Soviet tradition: he is, after all, a KGB agent who operates by deception. It was an American diplomat, George Kennan, whose “long telegram” in 1946 warned of a deep continuity in Kremlin thinking. He argued that the Kremlin would respond only to strength. That was the basis for the policy of containment, as part of which Britain contributed tens of thousands of troops to the British Army of the Rhine. It was that strength, not paper promises, that deterred Moscow from further advances west.

Today, let us look at the Kremlin's recent record. The Helsinki Final Act of 1975—betrayed. The Budapest memorandum of 1994—betrayed. The NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997—betrayed. The Minsk agreements of 2014 and 2015—betrayed. This is foreign policy by lies. We must respond by being true to ourselves and provide the support Ukraine needs to stay strong, because that is what is needed to secure a lasting peace and shape our collective security so that Putin never invades again.

The UK has a unique role in helping to make that happen. My right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister was in Paris last week talking to our European allies about how we step up support for Ukraine, accelerate work on security guarantees and take more responsibility for the security of our continent. In Munich, I spoke to Vice-President Vance and Secretary of State Rubio. In Brussels, my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary chaired the Ukraine defence contact group, where US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth confirmed that, like us, the US wants to see a sovereign, prosperous Ukraine.

Europe must shoulder its share of the burden. With the United States and its unique capabilities, we can deter Putin from attacking Ukraine again and from escalating hybrid Russian attacks in Europe into some form of direct confrontation, so this week the Prime Minister and I will be travelling to Washington DC to meet President Trump. Ukraine needs friends and allies on both sides of the Atlantic working together to achieve “peace through strength”. Both President Trump and President Zelensky have spoken of their desire to achieve that, and the Prime Minister will reaffirm to Zelensky in a call today that it is Britain's goal as well.

That must include European countries investing more in our own defence and capabilities. Already, the UK has stepped up and sped up military assistance. We have committed £3 billion in military aid a year—every year, for as long it takes. Over the next two years, we will provide an additional £2.26 billion earmarked for military spending, via our share of the \$50 billion G7 loan backed by frozen Russian assets.

In addition, as the Prime Minister has made clear, we know our Kremlin history, and that is why we are ready to contribute to future security guarantees for Ukraine in the context of a US backstop, including by putting our own troops on the ground if necessary. That would not be an easy decision—anyone in this House who has taken responsibility for the lives of British servicemen and women can attest to that—but I know the whole House recognises that Ukraine's security is our security.

The UK also continues to set the pace on ratcheting up the economic pressure on the Kremlin. Together with our international partners, we have already denied Russia access to \$400 billion. Its war economy is increasingly unsustainable. Inflation is 9.9% and rising, and that is just the official figure. Interest rates are running at 21%. This year, Russia will spend almost 41% of its budget on defence and security.

Today, we are announcing our biggest package of sanctions since the early days of the war: over 100 targets, including 40 oil tankers—our largest set of ship specifications in a single sanctions package yet—as well as third-country enablers that are pouring money into Putin's war chest. New legislation imposes additional trade sanctions on Russia, too. That will deny Russia access to the world-leading expertise needed to maintain its war.

Today, the UK is also solidifying our historic 100-year partnership with Ukraine, which was signed by the Prime Minister and President Zelensky in Kyiv in January. In February, I saw for myself how much that partnership means to Ukraine, and how much potential there is for our collective growth and security. Together, we lay that agreement in Parliament for scrutiny, and I look forward to it entering into force when the process is complete—a clear sign of our confidence in Ukraine's future.

[Mr David Lammy]

Mr Speaker, this is a critical moment. I want to acknowledge how colleagues have stood united over these past three years, including hon. Members from all parties as well as noble Lords in the other place, the shadow Foreign Secretary, and several predecessors as Foreign Secretary. I am proud of that unity, which is a tribute to our country, proud of this country's unwavering support for our Ukrainian friends, and proud that the United Kingdom is rightly taking on the responsibility of bringing our allies together. That is how we confront a foreign policy based on lies, and how we secure Ukraine's future, secure Europe's future, and face down a Kremlin dictator once again. Slava Ukraini. I commend this statement to the House.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

4.10 pm

**Priti Patel (Witham) (Con):** I begin by thanking the Foreign Secretary for his statement and for advance sight of it. The House stands united with Ukraine on this grim milestone. Three years on from Putin's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, we all think of the innocent lives caught up in this terrible conflict: the civilians mercilessly killed in towns such as Bucha and Irpin and in the east, the young Ukrainian children forcibly deported to Russia, the families of brave troops who have not returned alive from the frontline, all those with life-changing injuries, and those who have lost their homes and possessions.

When the war started, the UK led global efforts to back Ukraine and, rightly, to punish Putin. From training tens of thousands of Ukrainian recruits on British soil and donating Challenger 2 battle tanks and Storm Shadow missiles, to being part of an unprecedented international sanctions response that has deprived Putin's regime of \$400 billion and one of the first countries to provide Ukraine with that multibillion-pound, multi-year funding pledge in military aid, the UK has led the way for Ukraine. Our support has made a material difference to Ukraine's ability to hold the line.

We must never forget that the cost of this war to Putin has been catastrophic. Russia's Black sea fleet has been pummelled, and it is likely that by summer Russia will have incurred 1 million casualties, with Putin desperately turning to North Korea for troops and to Iran for weapons. Meanwhile, as we have heard, Russia's economy is in dire straits. There have been uprisings against Putin's regime, and the central pitch of his leadership—that he was the great restorer of Russia's stability—lies in ruins.

The British public continue rightly to stand resolutely with Ukraine, and they expect us as politicians across the House to do so. I thank again the many thousands who have so generously opened up their homes to Ukrainians fleeing the war, including through the Homes for Ukraine scheme. They have genuinely showed the best of our country, the best of Britain.

Although there has been much debate about the course of the conflict in recent days, the war continues to rage. I urge the Government to continue giving Ukraine everything it needs—all the hardware it needs and the diplomatic support to strengthen its hand. I am sure that the Foreign Secretary, with the Prime Minister, will do that in Washington this week. There must be no let-up whatsoever.

We welcome today's announcement on new sanctions. Will the Foreign Secretary confirm that there are no plans to lift sanctions in the future? If he discusses the use of sanctions when he goes to Washington this week, and the role of the United States in that policy, will he assure us that he will update Members on whether we should expect to see any new resources and support, in either military aid or humanitarian support, in the coming weeks?

As the Foreign Secretary has said, now is the time for Britain to lead, as we did from day one, and ensure that Ukraine is in the best possible position to decide its own future. We should be very clear that it remains ultimately for Ukraine, as a proud and sovereign nation that has sacrificed so much to defend itself, to decide its own future, and that is peace through strength.

We want this terrible war to be brought to an end and, like President Zelensky, we want a lasting, reliable and just peace. However, the Euro-Atlantic community must continue to be intensely robust in the face of Putin's aggression, because the lesson of the past 20 years is clear: he only comes back for more. We must ensure that an illegal invasion like this can never happen again. We need a stronger deterrent. We recognise that the Prime Minister has commented on the options and the security guarantees in recent days, and I can assure the House that His Majesty's Opposition stand ready to engage with the Government at every single level.

We must lead our NATO allies in Europe. In the long-term, collective defence and planning must be co-ordinated to back Ukraine in its fight for freedom. As the Government know, there is already a fully-funded plan to spend 2.5% of GDP on defence by 2030, as set out by the previous Government. I strongly urge the Government to at least look at a minimum plan to match that commitment. We will work with them on how that is delivered, to set a new benchmark for other NATO countries to follow and to fire up everything we can on defence production.

The US knows that the UK has an influential role in NATO, and I am sure the Foreign Secretary will be discussing that this week. The target to spend 2.5% of GDP is not a goal in itself, but an important step on the journey to increase the strength of our defence spending. Given the threats that our nation faces, I urge the Government and the Foreign Secretary—because the issue is within his purview and Department—to review and repurpose some of the 0.5% currently spent on official development assistance to further our national defence, safety and security.

Finally, the moral and economic case for mobilising sovereign assets of Russia to support Ukraine is very clear. The Foreign Secretary has spoken about that already, but I urge the Government to do more. Mr Speaker, we stand united as one House. Slava Ukraini.

**Mr Lammy:** I am very grateful to the right hon. Lady for the unity she demonstrates once again in the Chamber on the subject. I confirm for her that, of course, all hardware and military support, all diplomatic support and all humanitarian support continue. We continue to discuss those issues with our European partners, particularly at meetings at the Munich security conference and subsequently, and we will continue to do that, to ensure that we put Ukraine in the strongest possible position.

The right hon. Lady rightly mentioned the British casualties during the last few years. Some 17 British nationals who served as members of the armed forces of Ukraine have been killed in action, and we remember them on this day.

The right hon. Lady also rightly mentioned our continued solidarity with Ukraine. We continue to discuss sanctions with our European partners. Just as we have announced a sanctions package today, the EU, following its meeting with the Foreign Affairs Council, has announced a sanctions package too, which will all bear down on Putin's war machine. I can confirm that we continue to support Ukraine with a medical aid package for its men and women on the frontline. I am grateful to the Defence Secretary for making further funds available in relation to that.

The right hon. Lady rightly comments on defence spending. We are grateful for the unity that the official Opposition are demonstrating on the issue. As we have said, it is very clear to all that Europe must pay a bigger part of the burden. In capitals across the continent, leaders are considering these issues. We have said that we will come forward with our plans shortly, and we will. In that context, as we have seen from the Secretary-General, NATO has been very clear about the burden-sharing and burden-shifting environment that we are now in.

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

**Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): In my role as Chair of the Defence Committee, I get the opportunity to meet many ambassadors, Defence Ministers, attachés and other stakeholders, both here in London and at events and gatherings such as the Munich security conference. There is considerable consternation and anxiety among them about whether long-established and hard-earned alliances, rather than a short-term transactional approach, can still be relied on.

Given the reduced American presence, and as we mark the third anniversary of Putin's full-scale illegal invasion of Ukraine, people are looking for leadership. I feel that this is our time as a nation to take that lead on defence and security matters in our continent. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it can be our Prime Minister who takes that lead in our continent while pulling together our transatlantic, NATO and other allies in the process?

**Mr Lammy:** The UK has been ironclad in its support for Ukraine. We have been forward-leaning as Ukraine's primary friend in Europe and across the world, under successive Governments. It is also the case that we have a special relationship with the United States, underpinned by a lot of military and defence capability and support over many, many years and, of course, a very close intelligence relationship. We bring all of that to bear in ensuring that we get a resolution to this terrible conflict, but a resolution that means we have an enduring peace in which Ukraine is at the centre of discussions. My hon. Friend should be absolutely sure that the UK intends to play its part, which is why we will meet with Donald Trump this week. The Prime Minister has also been at the centre of much shuttle diplomacy over this last period.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Calum Miller** (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I thank the Foreign Secretary for advance sight of his statement. Today marks three years since Putin launched his barbaric full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Many people, including Putin, expected Russian tanks to capture Kyiv in days, yet Putin failed to consider the resolve of the Ukrainian people. Three years on, Ukrainians bravely continue the fight against Putin's imperialism in defence of their sovereignty.

The UK and this House have stood together with Ukraine throughout these darkest hours. Across the country, people opened their homes to Ukrainian guests and demonstrated their opposition to Putin's war. We must continue to support Ukrainians living in the UK, including by providing urgent clarity on what permanent options to remain the Government will introduce for them.

However, the past week has exposed the fragility of the west's support for Ukraine. In parroting the Kremlin's false claims that Ukraine started this war and that President Zelensky is a dictator, President Trump has shown that the US cannot be trusted to support Ukraine's defence. That is why the UK, working with our continental allies, must step up to lead in Europe. That must include the UK committing to spend 2.5% of GDP on defence as soon as possible, and all parties working together to build a consensus on reaching 3%.

The Liberal Democrats support the Government's suggestion that British troops could join a reassurance mission in Ukraine if a just settlement is reached. That would depend on parliamentary approval for such military deployment. We also support the Government's announcement today of new sanctions targeting Russian kleptocrats. I urge the Foreign Secretary to add to that list the pro-Russian founder of Georgian Dream, Bidzina Ivanishvili.

The Government should also now move to seize the frozen Russian assets totalling £40 billion across the UK and Europe and channel those funds into Ukraine's defence. As a start, can the Foreign Secretary update the House on what is delaying the release of the £2.5 billion promised to Ukraine from the sale of Chelsea football club?

This week in Washington, the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary must make clear that the UK will continue to stand side by side with Ukraine for as long as it takes to preserve Ukrainian sovereignty. Slava Ukraini.

**Mr Lammy:** I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman. On his comments, we share President Trump's desire to bring this barbaric war to an end. We know that Russia could do that by withdrawing its troops tomorrow, and President Trump agrees with us that it is important that Ukraine is at the table. When I spoke to Secretary Rubio, he was absolutely clear that there can be no peace without Ukraine. He was also clear that because of the burden of UK and EU sanctions, there cannot easily be a resolution to this conflict without Europe at the table as well.

The hon. Gentleman asked about sanctions and designations. Combined across both parties, we have now introduced more sanctions for this crime and this



[Mr Lammy]

terrible conflict than for any other in our parliamentary history. I cannot comment on future designations, but the hon. Gentleman will know—and will have heard in my comments—that our desire is to put Ukraine in the strongest possible position. We know that Putin has turned his economy into a war economy, and there are evasions that we will continue to bear down on.

The hon. Gentleman rightly mentioned Abramovich and the money that has been set aside. We are redoubling our efforts to unlock that money, which could be used on the frontline to support Ukraine over the course of the next few months.

**Ms Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I am sure that our Ukrainian allies will listen to the steadfast support in this House and feel heartened, and that they will also notice whose voices are absent from the House at this time. There are press reports that a deal is apparently imminent on Ukrainian mineral deposits for America as the price of continued support, so is there anything more that we and our European partners can do to stop the eventual products—those crucial metals—ending up in the hands of enemy and competitor states? Has that issue been discussed?

**Mr Lammy:** My hon. Friend asks a good question. I discussed that issue with President Zelensky when I was in Ukraine a few days ago, in the context of the 100-year partnership that we have just signed with Ukraine. That partnership is a unique document, not only in our history and Ukraine's history, but in the history of the world, and I believe it sets a pretty good guide for how to strike a relationship across many fronts. Of course, that relationship will bring big wins for British businesses over the years ahead, but it will also bring big wins for Ukrainian businesses—we will learn from their innovation. I look forward to the discussions that Ukraine is having with the United States. It is for Ukraine to make its own judgments, but I think that 100-year partnership could be a good guide.

**Jeremy Hunt** (Godalming and Ash) (Con): I thank the Foreign Secretary for the robust and bipartisan approach he is taking to this crisis. In that spirit, may I say to him that if the Government came forward with plans to reduce the number of adult welfare recipients just to 2019 levels, that would save £40 billion a year? It would mean that on Thursday he and the Prime Minister could say to President Trump that we are increasing defence spending to 3% of GDP, or even to 3.4% of GDP, which is what the United States itself spends. That would secure not only the future of Ukraine, but the future of NATO, which is one of the most important challenges facing the Government.

**Mr Lammy:** I recognise that the right hon. Gentleman has tremendous experience in these matters. He has put his views on the record, and I am sure that the Chancellor of the Exchequer will be looking very closely at them as part of the detailed conversations that go on across Government.

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It is clear that the rules-based order established after the second world war is under extreme threat from

oppressors and bullies who think that they can just take what they want—and I am not just talking about Putin. A raft of sanctions were introduced in 2022; why does my right hon. Friend think that previous sanctions failed to curb Russia, and what more do we need to do to organisations that use different measures to circumvent sanctions?

**Mr Lammy:** My hon. Friend refers to the rules-based order. That order was set up not just for its own sake, but because of the tremendous bloodshed and loss of life, including the many men and women from our own country and from the United States and other allies who lost their lives across Europe. The order has served us well, and we have to ensure that we continue to protect it. She rightly refers to the evasion that we have seen with the Russian shadow fleet, and that is part of the discussions I have to have with certain states who facilitate it. It is why she will also see in the announcement that I have made more efforts to target the dual-use technology that is finding its way out of countries such as China and being used against Ukrainian men and women.

**Mr James Cleverly** (Braintree) (Con): We need to recognise that the environment in which we operate has changed fundamentally, and therefore our response must change fundamentally. I very much echo the calls of my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) to increase defence spending now, because we have to send a message to our friends and foes alike that we take defence seriously. I urge the Foreign Secretary to remember the commitments we made to the Ukrainian people when this full-scale invasion took place. Our support to them was not contingent on the support of others; it was absolute, and we should make good on that commitment, because we said things that encouraged the Ukrainians to put their sons and daughters in harm's way. They have stood up their end of the bargain, and we should stand up ours.

**Mr Lammy:** The right hon. Gentleman is right: we have been Ukraine's foremost friend, and we will continue to do that. We have a key role to play, because of our special relationship with the United States. We understand here in Europe that, yes, we want this war to end, but we want an enduring peace. We have got a long memory in relation to the Soviet Union and tsarist history, and that guides us on how we secure that peace.

**Paul Waugh** (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): This weekend, I joined Rochdale's proud, long-standing Ukrainian community to mark the third anniversary of Putin's illegal war and to remember all those who have lost their lives to Russian aggression. Our own Father Ben Lysykanych is today joining the Prime Minister in Downing Street. Does my right hon. Friend agree that President Zelensky is a democrat, not a dictator, and that the Ukrainian people can never again have their fate decided by other countries carving up their land, as has happened far too often in the past?

**Mr Lammy:** I have met President Zelensky six or seven times over this last period, and he has always struck me as the most courageous and brave of individuals, leading his people to self-determination. That is something that we recognise right across the United Kingdom, and so we stand with him.



**Mike Martin** (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): I was at the Munich security conference and it became clear while talking with our European allies that they no longer fully trust the article 5 security guarantee. Put simply, they do not trust the Americans. Conversations naturally turned to what collective defence looks like in Europe without the Americans. Last night, Chancellor-elect Merz said that conversations are happening at the highest levels on precisely that. Will the Foreign Secretary comment on whether the UK is included in those conversations and on their content?

**Mr Lammy:** NATO has stood the test of time as the greatest modern-day alliance that we have ever seen, and has been strengthened further following the joining of Sweden and Finland. Of course there is a debate in Europe—there is a debate about burden sharing, there is a debate about burden shifting, and there are some who think that there is a debate about burden dumping—but NATO is a great alliance, and we work across that alliance. Successive United States Presidents, from Roosevelt to Obama and, of course, President Trump, have rightly said that Europe must do more, and that is what we now have to do.

**Derek Twigg** (Widnes and Halewood) (Lab): The question of defence spending and GDP has been raised. I think it is clear from recent events that we cannot wait until 2030 to spend 2.5%, and, in fact, we should be exceeding that percentage.

In the lead-up to any negotiations, it is essential for us to ensure that Ukraine is in the strongest possible position, including militarily. It is also essential for us to speed up our help and support as quickly as possible. I understand that the Ukrainian defence industrial base has the capacity to increase the production of weapons and equipment. Can we do more to get funding to it to ensure that that happens? Our current problem is that our own industrial base cannot gear up quickly enough.

**Mr Lammy:** My hon. Friend has asked an excellent question about Ukraine's industrial base. Drone technology, for instance, is improving apace around the world, and the country leading that technology is Ukraine. We have much to learn. We have signed the 100-year partnership, and capacity and capability are part of that partnership, which will please my hon. Friend, but he is right to say that we cannot wait; we have to act now. That is what was being discussed when the Defence Secretary was in Ukraine a short time ago, and it is what I was discussing with Ukraine a few weeks ago. So yes, we will accelerate the way in which our industries work together, and will allocate the funds that are necessary.

**Mr Andrew Mitchell** (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The whole House will want to wish the right hon. Gentleman, and the Prime Minister, a strong and successful visit later this week. He will be able to agree with the President about the importance of all European members of NATO stepping up and playing their part in the significant increase in defence expenditure that we all now need to see, while of course never forgetting what General Mattis has said about the important part of the mix that development constitutes in national defence. However, I hope there will be no compromise in Washington on the facts of the matter, namely that a P5 member of the United Nations invaded its neighbour in an act that we

thought had gone out with the last century, has bombed and destroyed its infrastructure, and has butchered and murdered its citizens.

**Mr Lammy:** The right hon. Gentleman has reminded the House of the seriousness, and the responsibilities, that we have as permanent members of the United Nations Security Council. That seriousness is underpinned by the UN Charter, which Russia breached, and in doing so it has made a serious hole in the way the Security Council works. Let us get beyond that; but if we are to do so, Russia should withdraw and should come to the table with the central issue of peace and making amends at its heart.

**Dr Jeevun Sandher** (Loughborough) (Lab): Keeping ourselves safe here means showing Putin that we have the resolve and the resources to defeat him, as indeed we have. In European NATO our combined GDP is about \$24.5 trillion, and the GDP of the United States is \$27 trillion, while Russia's is just \$2 trillion. We have more resources, and converting them into more fighting forces, tanks, guns and drones is key, but we can go further. Russian central bank assets held by ourselves and our allies amount to more than £200 billion, including £170 billion in Belgium and £26 billion here, and Putin could use those reserves in the future to rebuild his armed forces. Can the Foreign Secretary assure me that he is doing everything he can to convince our allies of the need to seize those assets to keep us safe and to fund Ukraine?

**Mr Lammy:** My hon. Friend asks a good question. If we are serious about the responsibility of burden sharing across Europe and, indeed, across G7 nations at this time, one of the issues on the table is moving from freezing assets to seizing those assets. It is a live discussion. There are other ways to find the funds, and that was a topic of discussion in Munich and at the G7, but we must now move from discussion to action.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): I will resist the temptation to ask the Foreign Secretary if he shares my feeling of disgust at the spectacle of the leader of the free world showering praise and admiration on the killer in the Kremlin. When he speaks to his counterparts, will he try to impress on them that the reason why George Kennan's containment policy, to which he rightly referred, was so successful in preventing the cold war from turning into the third world war was that contentious territory was not demilitarised and left undefended? It worked in the case of West Germany, and it will have to be the only way that western Ukraine can equally be secured for the future.

**Mr Lammy:** The containment strategy to which the right hon. Gentleman refers ran right through the Reagan years and beyond. In a sense, it is the conventional way to understand peace through strength, and we would do well to keep it at the front of our minds in the days and weeks ahead.

**John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the international community must not allow the sovereign nation of Ukraine to be traded like a chess piece by powerful nations, particularly after its brave defence of freedom and the international rules-based system for itself and the wider world? If we fail, we risk another "peace in our time" moment that would sooner or later endanger other countries and even our own.

**Mr Lammy:** My hon. Friend is right, and we know that Ukrainians felt let down by the Budapest memorandum. They felt brutally let down by the Minsk agreement, and they cannot be let down again. We also know that because of the unbelievable Ukrainian spirit, they would fight on, with guerrilla warfare if need be. These are the most admirable of people fighting for their self-determination, and the United Kingdom will continue to stand with them.

**Stephen Flynn** (Aberdeen South) (SNP): The Scottish National party has stood alongside the people of Ukraine in solidarity—not just for the last three years but for the last 10 years, following Putin's invasion of Crimea. I will not invite the Foreign Secretary to agree with me on this in the Chamber, but I am sure he thinks that President Trump's remarks about Zelensky being a dictator were beyond repulsive. Surely we all know that no deal can be made with Vladimir Putin that he will not break. Does the Foreign Secretary agree?

**Mr Lammy:** The right hon. Gentleman has a point. Russia and Putin have been clear about the terms that they want for peace, which have often included the removal of 14 of NATO's 32 members. That is unacceptable. We have seen Finland and Sweden join recently. The precondition for talks has been that Ukraine should effectively give up the territory now occupied by Russia. It seems to me that such demands show utter contempt for Ukrainian territorial integrity. The Russians will not be serious about discussions until they reconsider the criteria that we heard once again from Lavrov last week.

**Tulip Siddiq** (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): A constituent of mine and her son moved to this country under the Homes for Ukraine scheme. She has a very stable job here and her son is doing A-levels at the best maths school in London, but she is worried that her 18-month visa extension will expire in the middle of her son's exams. What conversations is the Foreign Secretary's Department having with the Home Office to ensure that young Ukrainians who moved here through no fault of their own do not have their education disrupted, but can build a life for themselves?

**Mr Lammy:** I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for putting on the record the tremendous support the British people have given to Ukrainian refugees. It allows me to say that there is still a war, and there is still a need for those people to seek sanctuary in our country. It is my assessment that Putin is not showing a serious willingness to negotiate, and it may be that negotiations go on for some time. So I want to reassure her constituent that we are of course in close dialogue with my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary.

**Sir Roger Gale** (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): Some of us are old enough to remember Hungary in 1956 and some of us are old enough to remember Czechoslovakia in 1968. None of us wants to see Ukraine sacrificed on the same altar of expediency. When the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister go to Washington, they will know that they will carry with them the good wishes of—almost—all of this House. Ukraine is not for sale, and it can never be for sale; this is not a transaction. The United Kingdom will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes.

**Mr Lammy:** I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for reminding us of the history. He will know that, in the 20th century, to the east it was only the Russo-Japanese war that stopped Russia's imperial ambitions, to the south it was the war in Crimea, and of course to the west it was the containment strategy to which I have referred and NATO. This history is our best adviser as we approach the matter of peace.

**Mark Sewards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I start by commending the people of Ukraine for resisting the murderous dictator Vladimir Putin for as long as they have. They are heroes. Almost every Member of this House knows that, if we fold in our support of Ukraine now and give Russia what it wants, Vladimir Putin will only come back for more. Our national security is at stake. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that it is in everyone's interests—Britain's, Europe's and America's—to ensure that any potential peace deal includes Ukraine at the table?

**Mr Lammy:** “Nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine” was heard loudly of course from President Zelensky, but all Europeans recognised it. I am pleased that Secretary of State Rubio, in my conversations with him, and indeed General Kellogg have both underlined the importance of Ukraine being at the table.

**Andrew George** (St Ives) (LD): I very warmly welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement. Although he perhaps cannot use the language I am about to use, I hope that when the Prime Minister and he meet Putin's appeaser in the White House later this week, he will remind him that if we have a special relationship—and the Foreign Secretary keeps referring to a special relationship—it has to be based on truth, respect for democracy, respect for justice and respect for international law.

**Mr Lammy:** In the end, the United States is leader of the free world. President Trump had an election in which 77 million people voted for him and he holds both Houses on the Hill, and as we would expect, he is of course buoyed up—as, indeed, was my party—by such a democratic mandate. We will have conversations with him over the coming days on a range of issues. Friends agree and can sometimes disagree, but I think it is definitely the case that we support his desire for bringing this horrendous war to an end. We will now play our part in Europe to ensure that we raise defence spending and that Europe steps up to the necessary burden sharing. President Trump's analysis of the huge problems in the Indo-Pacific are correct, and we must recognise that successive US Presidents have been clear about their responsibilities in relation to the Indo-Pacific.

**Tim Roca** (Macclesfield) (Lab): Despite the astonishing 10 days we have had, and we should be under no illusion that they have been astonishing, there has been reassurance to be found in the Government's steadfast commitment to Ukraine and the leadership they have been showing. The Foreign Secretary alluded earlier to Vladimir Putin's penchant for lying: he lied about the invasion; he lied about Ukraine's territorial integrity; he lied about the rules of war; and he abducted thousands of Ukrainian children. Does my right hon. Friend agree that not only should Ukraine be at the centre of the negotiations, but that we should be clear-eyed about the character of the man we are dealing with?

**Mr Lammy:** I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for mentioning the children who have been abducted. On the past two occasions I have been in Ukraine, I have met children who were viciously taken from their homes. There was an attempt to effectively brainwash them from their histories. We are supporting organisations that seek to get those children back and reunite them with their families. I also launched a children in care initiative. I was very pleased to be with Madam Zelensky, when I was last in Ukraine, supporting vulnerable children with their foster families.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does the Foreign Secretary agree that the 2.5% of GDP ship has now sailed, and that we and our allies have to find the resources to spend 3% within a recognisable timeframe? When he is in Washington this week, will he discuss with his interlocutors how the billions of pounds he proposes to give Mauritius for taking on the Chagos Islands could be better served by being devoted to building and re-equipping our armed forces?

**Mr Lammy:** Ten years ago, there were just four countries meeting the 2% commitment. Today, that has risen to 23. Right across the alliance, countries are understanding that they have to do more. We will set out how we will do more very, very shortly. As the matter today is Ukraine, the right hon. Gentleman will forgive me but I will not discuss issues to do with the British Indian Ocean Territory. I am sure he will have an occasion to do so at oral questions tomorrow.

**Mr Calvin Bailey** (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Just over three years ago, I flew the penultimate UK mission into Kyiv to deliver materiel essential to the defence of Ukraine ahead of the illegal full-scale Russian invasion. Since then, Ukraine has been defending European security, the UN charter and liberal democracy against Putin's assault on those shared interests, and, in the words of the declaration of independence, the "unalienable rights" of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

Does the Foreign Secretary agree that to free Ukraine from Putin's tyranny and imperialist ambition, and to ensure the words of the declaration of independence are realised for all, UK leadership in the co-ordination of European and transatlantic allies is essential?

**Mr Lammy:** Yes, yes, yes, I say to my hon. Friend. I think all of us pay tribute to our armed forces and to his work in our armed forces. It is because of that work over so many years—that sacrifice—that I think the spirit of this country guides us to stand solidly with Ukraine on a cross-party basis. He is right to pray in aid those words that underpin our values, and indeed global values as underpinned in the UN charter. That is what we are fighting for and we will not give up.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Does the Secretary of State regret recanting the views he originally expressed in assessing Trump? When the time is right—it is certainly not any time now—can I urge him to consider following the example of Archbishop Cranmer by plunging the offending hand first into the flame?

**Mr Lammy:** Er—[*Laughter.*] This is a serious debate and a serious discussion. As I have said, that is, in a sense, old news; there is so much news before us, and so much history to be forged, which requires diplomacy

and friendship and us understanding who the real threats are. Those real threats are the autocracies of the world, which could do tremendous damage over the coming years. I have always recognised that.

**Frank McNally** (Coatbridge and Bellshill) (Lab): As has been replicated across the country, people in Coatbridge and Bellshill have opened their doors to those forced from their homes by Putin's illegal attack. Public authorities have also stepped up: North Lanarkshire council has provided homes and supported integration for more than 200 Ukrainian families at the High Coats tower in my constituency, and has been recognised nationally for helping to deliver stability and belonging. As we continue to push for a just peace, and following the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Tulip Siddiq), will my right hon. Friend commit to working with the Home Secretary, devolved Governments and other key stakeholders to ensure safe harbour for the families so cruelly and viciously targeted by Putin's barbarism?

**Mr Lammy:** I assure my hon. Friend that that will be the case. I continue to work closely with the Home Secretary. There has been a tremendous outpouring of support across this country, which I recognise, and have seen at work in Scotland, too.

**Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): I welcome the robust statement from the Secretary of State today and the way he has stood by Ukraine and committed the UK to standing by Ukraine. I hope he will convey the same message to President Trump: that by giving into Putin, we jeopardise peace not only in Ukraine but across the whole of Europe.

First, what practical steps can he take, apart from the assurances he has given the House today, to ensure that Ukraine's interests are reflected in any negotiations? Secondly, given the stretched state of our own armed forces, what long-term security commitments can we give to Ukraine?

**Mr Lammy:** We have committed £3 billion in support to Ukraine for as long as it lasts. The Ukrainians asked for more munitions, and we supported them; they asked for particular missile capability, and we supported them. We will continue to support them because this war is being waged on the frontline; it is a war of attrition. Notwithstanding any discussions or talks, we need to be there with the Ukrainians, and I guarantee to the right hon. Gentleman that we will continue to do that.

**Melanie Ward** (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I was present at the Munich security conference where it felt like the world changed around us, and the consequences could not be more serious. I welcome our Government's announcement today of fresh sanctions on Russia. Given the absence of some on the Opposition Benches, I am sure the whole House will agree that it is President Putin, and not President Zelensky, who is the dictator. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that this is indeed a once-in-a-generation moment, and that the future of our security in the UK is bound up in Ukraine's security and in the need to do what it takes to face down the aggression of Putin's Russia?



**Mr Lammy:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right: because of the history of Russia and the former Soviet Union, we understand deeply that our own futures are bound up in Putin's ambitions. We also understand, by the way, that there are many valiant people resisting Putin in Russia; I met Mrs Navalny at the Munich security conference. Our fight is not with the Russian people—it is to support the Russian people. Our fight is with Vladimir Putin.

**Saqib Bhatti** (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): When Putin invaded, he thought it would be a matter of weeks. Three years on, Ukraine is still standing. I am proud of how we as a House and as a nation stood up for Ukraine. That includes many of my constituents, for which I commend them. My right hon. Friend the shadow Foreign Secretary asked about sanctions, but I did not hear an answer from the Foreign Secretary, so he perhaps he can shed some light. When the Prime Minister meets President Trump, will he raise the issue of new sanctions, which I would welcome? Will we urge the US to follow suit?

**Mr Lammy:** We continue to discuss sanctions with all our partners. I discussed that with G7 partners, including Secretary of State Rubio. We have imposed sanctions on more than 2,100 individuals and entities—the most wide-ranging sanctions imposed on any major economy. We believe that maximum pressure is required at this time. The United States has indicated that it would be willing to impose further sanctions on Russia. That issue remains under discussion.

**Luke Myer** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I welcome the important statement from the Foreign Secretary and the comments from the shadow Foreign Secretary. This entire House should be united in our support for Ukraine. As others have said, it is rather a shame that one party has not shown up.

Ukrainians who have come to the UK since the war have made such an important contribution to our country. I met Olha, a Ukrainian Teessider, over the weekend. She shared with me that many Ukrainians face great uncertainty, partly because they are unable to access work and study because of the lack of a Ukrainian GCSE. Will the Foreign Secretary discuss this issue with the Department for Education to ensure that Ukrainians are able to access study and work? Will he recognise at the Dispatch Box the importance of the contribution that Ukrainians have made to our country?

**Mr Lammy:** There has been a history between us and Ukrainians, as they were making a contribution across Europe and in our country long before this war began. My hon. Friend makes a very good point about the Ukrainian language. I have admired many Ukrainians for the way that they have quickly learned the English language. I will take his recommendation to the Education Secretary.

**Ben Lake** (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): I join others in commending the Ukrainian people for their bravery in the face of Russian aggression, and the Government's steadfast support for the nation's sovereignty. The Foreign Secretary referred in his statement to the need for European nations to contribute more to future security guarantees for the Ukrainian people. Does he envisage more bilateral and multilateral agreements between

European allies playing a part in that endeavour, much in the vein of the Lancaster House treaties or, latterly, the Trinity House agreement?

**Mr Lammy:** The hon. Gentleman is right that the UK has sought to forge strong relationships with key partners across Europe. Once the new Government are formed in Germany, we look forward to signing an updated Lancaster House treaty with our German friends. He is right that, bilaterally, that is important. I believe that NATO is the central underpinning of European security, but we need to work together across Europe to increase our industrial defence capability, and we need to find more funds to increase our defence spending right across the European family. He will hear more about that in the coming weeks and months.

**Mr Jonathan Brash** (Hartlepool) (Lab): The Foreign Secretary was right that if Russia is serious about a lasting peace, it must respect Ukraine's sovereignty, but given that it has shown absolutely no sign of doing that, will he reiterate that we will stand shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine no matter what? Will he further reiterate, even for the Members who have not chosen to be here for this statement, that this country does not appease fascists but opposes them?

**Mr Lammy:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why, since February 2022, the United Kingdom's total military, economic and humanitarian support for Ukraine has amounted to £12.8 billion. That is our commitment to Ukraine so far, and that commitment will continue.

**Monica Harding** (Esher and Walton) (LD): I am proud that more than 600 Ukrainians have been hosted in my constituency through the Homes for Ukraine programme. Three years on, my constituents stand with Ukraine. They know that Ukraine has protected Europe's frontline for three years. They know that Ukraine's fight is one that affects us all, and that if Ukraine loses, Europe loses, and they know that Ukrainians are fighting for the values of our forebears: the British values of democracy and freedom. Will the Foreign Secretary commit to stand by Ukraine steadfast, even when others do not? In his meetings in Washington tomorrow, will he ensure that he points out the folly and the danger of the US Administration's new approach to Russia?

**Mr Lammy:** The UK, of course, supports the US-led efforts to get a lasting peace in Ukraine that deters Russia from future aggression and ensures that Ukraine is at the table as we negotiate that peace. That is the issue that we will be discussing with President Trump, just as President Macron is discussing that issue today. I am quite sure that our assessment that Putin is not ready, really, to negotiate on proper terms stands, but I admire the efforts to bring that about. Of course, the US plays a central role in achieving that.

**Kevin Bonavia** (Stevenage) (Lab): Today, we pay tribute to the people of Ukraine fighting not only for their own freedom but for the freedom of all Europe. The Foreign Secretary said that we must learn from history. Over 80 years ago in Munich, this country and others talked away the future of Czechoslovakia without it being there and stripped it of its vital resources; we all know



the tragic consequences. Today, there can be no peace without Ukraine, and there can be no enduring peace without the security that this country and other NATO allies can give to it.

**Mr Lammy:** My hon. Friend puts his remarks well. I agree with him.

**Sir Alec Shelbrooke** (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): I can barely believe that I have got to say this to the Foreign Secretary, but he will be unaware that in past moments the United States has just voted against the UN resolution condemning Russian aggression in Ukraine.

I understand fully the position that the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister are in and the approach that they have got to take in Washington this week, but we know that President Trump listens to the people who last spoke to him. Can I therefore ask the Foreign Secretary to outline two important points? First, European military assets—not NATO assets—are often used to support American operations in the Indo-Pacific, and the American military really appreciates how we put our shoulder to the wheel. It is not the Americans only ever supporting Europe; we also help the Americans.

Secondly, last week, I and several hon. Members and noble Members were at the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in Brussels, where it was made clear that what will be presented at the Hague summit is what is actually needed for European defence rather than just GDP targets. May I also ask the Foreign Secretary to advise the Prime Minister that it will be important that he takes a position with the President of the United States that if those demands add up to more than 2.53% of GDP, our country will set itself on a path, within the time targets, to achieve those?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** Order. Can I remind Members that if we are to get everybody in, shorter questions—and shortish answers, please—would be helpful?

**Mr Lammy:** The right hon. Gentleman mentions the Indo-Pacific, and it is important that we remember AUKUS and our critical partnership with Australia and the United States in relation to that. He quite rightly mentioned defence spending, on which much has been said in this Chamber—and much, I am sure, will be said when we go to the United States.

**Chris McDonald** (Stockton North) (Lab): I thank the Foreign Secretary for a strong statement. He said that Ukraine's security is our security. Does he agree that this is a fight for democracy where we need to tackle misinformation both at home and abroad, and where we need to maintain our steadfast commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty?

**Mr Lammy:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for mentioning that, because there is hybrid warfare taking place as we speak. Countries such as Moldova are at the forefront of it, with sabotage and constant attacks on its infrastructure and its internet services. This is hybrid warfare, and of course it is taking place against our own country, so he is absolutely right: this is not just a hard war and a hot war; it is a hybrid war, and we have to be vigilant.

**Adrian Ramsay** (Waveney Valley) (Green): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's statement. It is indeed important that we have cross-party support across this House, standing in solidarity with Ukraine and being clear that Ukraine must be front and centre of the peace talks that must take place, but it is deeply disturbing to hear some of the comments from President Trump, including the absurd claim that Zelensky is a dictator and the ridiculous suggestion that Ukraine started the war. Therefore, when the Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister go to Washington later this week, will they make it clear to President Trump that Ukraine must be at the centre of these peace talks and that the Ukrainian people have an absolute right to self-determination?

**Mr Lammy:** Yes. There must be no negotiation about Ukraine without Ukraine. As I have said, we have seen very little sign that Putin is abandoning his goal of subjugating Ukraine. Russia has continued to escalate this war, including through deploying Democratic People's Republic of Korea troops and through daily barbaric attacks on innocent Ukrainian civilians and their infrastructure and energy supplies.

**Josh Dean** (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): On Saturday, I joined Ukrainian families and residents in Bishop's Stortford to remember those who had lost their lives and suffered throughout this conflict, ahead of the third anniversary. This was a reminder that in my constituency and across the country, we stand firmly with the Ukrainian people. As we mark the third anniversary, will the Foreign Secretary reiterate to the Ukrainian families who have found safety in my constituency, and indeed to all Ukrainian people, that this Government will continue to advocate for Ukraine's sovereignty and for it to be given a seat at the table right at the heart of any future negotiation?

**Mr Lammy:** I know my hon. Friend's constituency well, and I am very pleased to give his constituents that affirmation.

**Jim Allister** (North Antrim) (TUV): No Member of this House should be in any doubt as to who the aggressor is in this situation, who the dictator is, or who started this war. No one should give cover to the dictator who started this war. The Prime Minister has said that, if there is peace, he anticipates a post-peace situation where there will be British troops on the ground in Ukraine, with what he termed "a US backstop". Does the Foreign Secretary agree that the prospect of a US backstop would be greatly enhanced if the European nations began more thoroughly to shoulder the financial burden that has been shirked in recent years?

**Mr Lammy:** Yes, I do. There was complacency in the post-cold war period across the European families, and at this Dispatch Box we have lamented the fact that the United Kingdom has fallen to 2.3% of GDP, so the hon. and learned Gentleman is right. This is the time to step up and to demonstrate peace with strength, and the Baltic nations are very clear about the responsibility at this time.

**Jonathan Hinder** (Pendle and Clitheroe) (Lab): Like the Foreign Secretary, I am incredibly proud of the role that the UK has played in supporting Ukraine, and

[Jonathan Hinder]

especially proud of the role that my constituents have played in welcoming Ukrainians into their homes and into our community, but if we are to stop Putin, Britain must get real on defence. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that we must now urgently rearm, well beyond the existing 2.5% target, so that, with our European allies, we can protect our precious democracies?

**Mr Lammy:** As I said, we will set out further defence spending shortly.

**Claire Young** (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): NATO countries bordering Russia are understandably stepping up their defences without waiting for others to take action. Will the Foreign Secretary update the House on the discussions he has had with those countries?

**Mr Lammy:** I met the Polish Foreign Minister at the Munich security conference and Baltic colleagues to discuss those issues. The hon. Member is absolutely right that those countries have been aware of the threat for some time. Her question allows me to say that when we talk about security guarantees for Ukraine, it is important to recognise NATO's eastern flank. When it comes to the effort to get US security guarantees, many countries on that flank would have to know that they were supported. That is why the US backstop is so important.

**Colum Eastwood** (Foyle) (SDLP): Last week, along with other Members of this House, I met Ukrainian parliamentarians at the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe in Vienna. The opposition MPs from Ukraine made it clear that they do not support Donald Trump's call for an election in Ukraine while they are defending against Russian aggression. In his conversations with the US Administration this week, will the Foreign Secretary make it clear that there is only one dictator in this conflict, and his name is Vladimir Putin?

**Mr Lammy:** Yes, of course.

**Chris Law** (Dundee Central) (SNP): On the third anniversary of Putin's brutal full-scale invasion of Ukraine, I welcome the United Nations having just passed a resolution condemning Russian aggression in Ukraine. However, in the last 15 minutes—this will shock the House—it was opposed by Russia and the United States. It was said in the press that

“This isn't appeasement by Trump. It's a direct stab in the back.”

Will the Foreign Secretary condemn what has just happened in the United Nations, where the United States has joined Russia in not signing up to the resolution condemning Russian aggression in Ukraine?

**Mr Lammy:** We are proud to have co-sponsored the General Assembly resolution, proposed by Ukraine, in support of a just and lasting peace in Ukraine. It is in line with the UN charter. The UN voted for it, and we will stand forever with Ukraine.

**Andrew Lewin** (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): Yesterday, Ukrainians in Welwyn Hatfield came together in sober recognition of the third anniversary of the Russian invasion. I pay tribute to them for their bravery and resilience, and for how they are going about rebuilding their lives as valuable members of our community.

I told them that in this House, I would speak the truth, and stand up for them as best I could. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that we need to say loud and clear from the Dispatch Box that one person was the aggressor, one person is responsible for the death and destruction, and—we should say it emphatically—one person started this war, and his name is Vladimir Putin?

**Mr Lammy:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right. When I was in Kyiv, I saw that close to President Zelensky's office is an apartment block that was blown up a few weeks ago. A couple asleep in their bed were killed. That is the awfulness of this war. Of course, my hon. Friend will recall that when the Prime Minister visited, Putin sought to fire missiles into Ukraine. It is grim and unbelievable brutality, and of course we must continue to stand up to it.

**Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): In response to the right hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn), the Foreign Secretary said that Russia does not respect the territorial integrity of Ukraine. On his comments on the Ukraine defence contact group, the US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth says that the US wants to see “a sovereign and prosperous Ukraine”,

but given the news that we have just heard about the UN resolution, how confident is the Foreign Secretary that the US will respect the territorial integrity of Ukraine?

**Mr Lammy:** I am very pleased that the US has attempted to bring this horrendous war to an end. That does require conversations with Russia. Those are hard conversations, and I am not sure that the Russians are ready to properly negotiate, but I admire the attempt to try. It is important that Ukraine is at the table; it is important that Europe steps up with burden-sharing and increases its defence. Those are issues that we will discuss with President Trump in the coming days.

**Paul Davies** (Colne Valley) (Lab): Online propaganda from the Kremlin has become a disturbing reality. Social media, especially platforms such as Facebook and X, have been flooded with the claim that Ukraine is solely responsible for the war—it is extraordinary. What measures are being taken to combat the propaganda being spread by Governments to blame the Ukrainian people for the conflict?

**Mr Lammy:** Those are important issues that I know preoccupy my hon. Friends in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. They are looking further at those issues and at what more we can do.

**Robin Swann** (South Antrim) (UUP): The Prime Minister said this morning that Russia does not hold all the cards. I welcome the Foreign Secretary's announcement of further sanctions. Will he work at national and international level to ensure that President Putin does not get a new hand that allows him to proceed with bluff, bluster and bullying that could bring the Ukrainian people to their knees—something that we have not seen to date? Will he assure the House that the Government stand resolutely with the people of Ukraine?

**Mr Lammy:** The hon. Gentleman is right. That is why I met G7 Foreign Ministers, and we issued a joint statement on Ukraine 10 days ago. It is why I discussed this issue at the G20 in South Africa last week. I am proud of the work of our diplomats in the UN General Assembly today, where many countries have come together in support of Ukraine, with a resolution that had to be passed.

**Helen Maguire** (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Today of all days, we must remember that over 1 million people have been killed or wounded in Ukraine since the illegal invasion. I have just come from talking to a group of individuals who support Ukrainian veterans. Although they welcome the medical expertise that the UK has provided in Ukrainian military hospitals, there are also thousands of civilian casualties, so they ask that the UK provide medical expertise in civilian hospitals as well. Will the Foreign Secretary look into whether the UK can provide that support too?

**Mr Lammy:** I am very pleased about the decisions that I and the Defence Secretary have made to support Ukrainian armed forces at this time with medical support. I am happy to look at the issues facing civilians, which of course we discuss in a pan-European context. The hon. Lady is right to raise those issues.

**Seamus Logan** (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): Surely it cannot be right to leave those with no real care or concern for Europe's wellbeing the sole voice in negotiating the future of Ukraine—and by extension the future of Europe. Will the Foreign Secretary convey, in his discussions with President Trump, the

point that Ukraine must be present at the table when negotiations take place, and will he convey the disgust of this House at the fact that the US voted alongside North Korea and Russia against the Ukrainian resolution at the UN today?

**Mr Lammy:** We have been clear: nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine. The Ukrainians must have a seat at the table; it is their destiny that is in the mix in any discussions that take place.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Foreign Secretary's strong words, commitment, strength and fortitude. I will always welcome the end to war, but I am unable to forget the mass murder of Ukrainian civilians and prisoners of war by Russian armed forces during the fight for and occupation of the city of Bucha three days after the invasion started. To remind the House, girls as young as eight and women as old as 80 were raped; three Baptist church pastors were murdered; and nine children under the age of 18 were murdered. They were all put into a basement, had petrol poured over them and were burned alive. I and the people I represent want any deal to include the accountability of those who committed those dreadful, dreadful war crimes, and so many others that are still unknown.

**Mr Lammy:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for reminding us of the massacre at Bucha. I had the privilege of visiting Bucha and spending time with the community there—with families, victims and loved ones. The massacre was an horrendous act. It was criminal, barbaric and inhumane. He is right that we in this country have led on the issue of justice and accountability, and we will not let that go.



## Breakfast Clubs: Early Adopters

5.25 pm

### **The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson):**

With permission, I will make a statement updating the House on the Government's work to deliver free breakfast clubs and give every child the best start in life. This is a Government who act on their principles, deliver on their promises and drive the change that the country needs—change that is felt in our villages, towns and cities; change that will help families with the cost of living; and change that lifts the life chances of our children across the country. Change begins and the biggest difference can be made during those early years of life, and on into primary school, when the possibilities still stretch out.

Our action is urgent. Far too many children growing up in this country are held back by their background and denied the opportunity to go on to live happy and healthy lives, with the bad luck of a tough start weighing down their life chances. I will not stand by while those children are let down, because I believe that background should not mean destiny. Every single child deserves the very best start in life. To achieve and thrive at school is the right of all children.

Our manifesto outlined the action a Labour Government would take, and now, not yet eight months on from the election, we are delivering change in early years, change in primary schools and change in our country. I am delighted to update the House today that I have confirmed more than 750 schools as early adopters of our free breakfast club scheme. That is a promise made, and a promise kept. I will always act to protect working families' livelihoods for children and their parents. It is for them that we are working tirelessly to deliver change, and it is for them that we will introduce free breakfast clubs in every primary school in this country. That is what we said we would do in our manifesto, and it is exactly what we are doing now.

Evidence shows why this matters so much. When schools introduce breakfast clubs, behaviour improves, attendance increases and attainment grows. That is no surprise when we are giving children the gift of a calm, welcoming start to the day, filled with friends, fun and food. It is the foundation for success that every child needs. This is about parents as well as children. Our new breakfast clubs will save families up to £450 a year, putting money directly back into parents' pockets. That is why we are moving ahead with such energy and urgency, for children and for parents.

We are working to cement the clubs in legislation through the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill. Thousands of schools have applied to take part—an indication of overwhelming demand, and a spur to act. From this April, free breakfast clubs will begin to reach more than 180,000 children, and 70,000 pupils from schools in the most deprived parts of the country will be able to take part. Our early adopter schools are drawn from all kinds of places: cities and villages, north and south, east and west, affluent areas and more disadvantaged communities, big schools and smaller schools, mainstream schools and special schools for children with special educational needs and disabilities. They include schools that have had a club before and those that have not; schools in which parents have had

to pay for breakfast clubs in the past; and schools in which places are limited. That variety is key. It gives us a representative sample, so we can see what works, when, where, why and how, guided by the best evidence. That is how we will maximise the impact of the full roll-out, bringing the benefits to children across the entire country.

We are taking a new approach—the challenges we face demand it. Breakfast clubs are one part, but we are going further and delivering more change for children. We are a mission-led Government, bringing meaningful change that is felt in our towns, our cities, and our communities, and I am proud to be leading our mission across Government to break down the barriers to opportunity. In December the Prime Minister unveiled our plan for change, and within that plan lies a vital milestone: a record proportion of children starting school, ready to learn. That is crucial to closing the opportunity gap; all children arriving at school, ready to achieve and to thrive gets right to the heart of what it means to have the very best start in life.

I believe that delivering the best start in life is about families—parents and children. Breakfast clubs are one piece of the puzzle, but our action starts earlier in life, with great early education and childcare. It is something that I have spent many years in this House fighting for, but that our childcare system has denied families. There are areas underserved with childcare places yet overwhelmed with demand; additional hours are offered nationally, but they are unavailable to families locally. The Opposition's failure to keep their promises is the reason their party suffered such an emphatic defeat at the last election. A promise made but not acted on is not a promise at all, and a pledge without a plan to deliver is meaningless. That is why this Government are committed to delivering the entitlements that parents were promised before the last election. As a result of this Government's hard work in making that pledge a reality, families can now access 15 hours of Government-funded childcare a week from when their child is nine months old. From September, that will increase to 30 hours a week, matching the offer for three and four-year-olds.

This Government have matched the pledge with a plan—a promise now backed by funding. In the next financial year alone, we will invest more than £8 billion in early years entitlements, an increase of more than £2 billion. On top of that is a new £75 million expansion grant to support the sector to provide the extra places and staff needed. We will use those 30 hours a week to combine childcare with great early education, and to give children the very best start in life. I want to double down on support for those children who need it most, in the areas that need it most. That is why I introduced the biggest ever uplift to the early years pupil premium. Childcare delivers for parents too. Just like breakfast clubs, the entitlements give parents power, choice and freedom over their lives, enabling them to go back to work if that is what they want to do—work choices for parents; life chances for children. These are the steps we are taking and the promises we are keeping to support families.

I am determined to see the change through, but it is not a shot in the dark. The value of giving children the best start in life, and the power of spreading breakfast clubs across the country, is as clear as day and there for all to see if we know where to look. On the northern edge of St Helens sits Carr Mill primary school. Children at

Carr Mill can come in before the school day starts and eat breakfast with their friends in the school bistro. When they reach year 5, they are invited to become bistro leaders. Those young leaders help their peers to get a good breakfast, but they also learn about responsibility, caring for their classmates, and what it means to be part of a community. Parents see the change in their children, who are more confident and eager to go to school in the morning, and the younger ones look up to the bistro leaders.

It is not just the breakfast; it is the club too—helping children to settle, showing them that they belong in school, getting them ready to learn, and shaping not just the students of today but the citizens of tomorrow. It sets children up for success in school and in life, because that wider goal we are chasing of giving every child the best start in life means giving them the best start to their school day, each and every day, week after week, year after year. That is how we are breaking the link between background and success, and how we are delivering the change that parents voted for. That is how we are driving the change that the children of this country deserve. I commend this statement to the House.

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

5.33 pm

**Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con):** I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of the statement. The previous Government substantially expanded access to breakfast clubs in primary and secondary schools, and crated the holiday activities and food programme. The national school breakfast programme has been running since 2018, and 85% of schools now have a breakfast club, with one in eight having a taxpayer-funded breakfast club. In March 2023, the previous Government announced £289 million for the national wraparound childcare funding programme, some of which is being used to fund breakfast clubs. That was part of a much wider expansion of free childcare that saw spending on entitlement to free childcare more than double in real terms between 2010 and 2024.

I was struck by the comments made by Mark Russell from the Children's Society during the evidence sessions for the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill. Given the resource constraints, he said taxpayer money should be focused on rolling out free breakfasts to a greater number of deprived secondary schools, rather than providing a universal offer in primary schools. He said:

"I would like to see secondary school children helped, and if the pot is limited, I would probably step back from universality and provide for those most in need."—[*Official Report, Children's Wellbeing and Schools Public Bill Committee*, 21 January 2025; c. 55, Q122.]

With that in mind, I want to draw attention to the uncertainty created by the Government's refusal to commit to funding the existing free breakfast provision in secondary schools beyond next year, and likewise the holiday activities and food programme. A number of charities have called for Ministers to guarantee that funding beyond next year, and I join them in asking the Secretary of State to give that guarantee. Getting rid of the existing free breakfasts would mean a cut in provision for deprived children at secondary schools, so will the Secretary of State guarantee to continue them?

According to a report by the Institute for Fiscal Studies last year:

"Based on the experience of the national school breakfast programme, the estimated annual cost today would be around £55 per pupil participating for food-only provision and double that (around £110) for a 'traditional' before-school breakfast club. Labour's manifesto offers £315 million overall in 2028; this could be enough to fund all primary school pupils under a food-only model, or 60% of pupils if the party plumps for a traditional breakfast club with some childcare element."

Will the Secretary of State respond to that point made by the IFS? Do the Government plan food-only provision? If not, how does she plan to close that funding gap?

Paul Bertram, headteacher at Buxworth primary school in Derbyshire, told *Schools Week* that he had to pull out of the pilot scheme as it left him with a £9,000 funding shortfall. The charity Magic Breakfast said:

"if it is expected that 100 per cent of people can access a traditional breakfast club setting, with the appropriate staffing, then the Government is many, many millions away from the budget that we would expect that would require."

Will the Secretary of State say how many schools applied to be part of the pilot, but subsequently pulled out? A number of journalists have asked that question. How many of the schools chosen to take part in the pilot already have a breakfast club, and how many already have a free breakfast club? Looking at the first 100 on the list, 71 have a breakfast club and 13 have a free breakfast club, but what are the numbers overall? If pupils need to have a one-to-one teaching assistant, how will funding for that work?

Ministers say that the policy

"will save parents up to £450 a year".

The Secretary of State said that again today, but Ministers used to use a figure of £400. To give £450 to all 4.5 million pupils in primary schools would cost over £2 billion a year. In contrast, the pilot will cost £33 million. Labour's manifesto said the programme will spend £315 million by 2028, which would mean a spend of £70 per primary school child, not £450. Will the Secretary of State explain the discrepancy between the planned spend and the much larger benefits that Ministers are claiming?

Parents on lower wages are bearing the brunt of the £25 billion increase in national insurance; as the Office for Budget Responsibility and the IFS have pointed out, that increase will directly hit wages, which even the Chancellor has now acknowledged. The biggest losers from that tax increase are those earning less than £15,000 a year. People who are among those most affected by the £25 billion tax increase may not feel better off from the £315 million of planned spending, so it is vital that we are clear about what Ministers are really claiming and on what basis.

I mentioned that 85% of schools already have a breakfast club. The new requirement to offer free school breakfasts in all primary schools will interact with that existing provision in different ways. Many school breakfast clubs currently run for an hour on a paid-for basis, and I hope most will continue to provide at least the period they are providing now. However, if the breakfast club is provided for, say, an hour or more, the school will have to charge for the first 30 minutes of that hour, but not for the final 30 minutes, which is likely to give rise to considerable complexity. Will Ministers agree to report

[Neil O'Brien]

on the length of time that clubs are running in these schools, and on any reduction that this change may inadvertently bring about?

Taxpayer-funded breakfasts for those who really need them are helpful, but there are a number of questions about Ministers' plans and their claims about the scheme, so I look forward to the Secretary of State's answers.

**Bridget Phillipson:** The shadow Minister asks a number of questions, but at no point did he welcome the massive investment and the benefits that this provision will bring to children across our country, including in his own constituency—not a word of support. I hope when the breakfast club in his constituency opens, he might take time to visit that school and see the massive benefits being delivered to children and families.

Before I respond to the number of detailed questions that the hon. Gentleman asked, I note once again how disappointing it was that the Conservatives voted to block the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill. Let us remind ourselves what that would have meant. It would have completely stopped the roll-out of free breakfast clubs we are announcing today; they will be rolled out across England subject to the progress of the Bill. It would have stopped us limiting the number of branded uniform items that schools can demand, which again will save families hundreds of pounds at a time when we know that they are under real pressure. Most shamefully of all, the hon. Gentleman knows full well that it would have stopped dead some of the most far-reaching child protection measures in a generation, just so that the Conservatives could grab a cheap headline.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the national school breakfast programme and the investment there. That programme is an online platform from which schools can order food. It covers 75% of food only; it does not cover wider costs, and schools are required to contribute the remaining 25%, so there is a significant difference in what we are setting out. One in seven of the schools in the pilot scheme that we are announcing today have no before-school provision. The rest have a mix of paid-for provision or, in many cases, school breakfast clubs where caps are in place and the numbers are limited. The breakfast clubs we are introducing will be free and available to every child and every parent who seeks to take them up. That is why it is estimated that parents will save £450 a year.

When it comes to evidence of the roll-out, the hon. Gentleman has said on many occasions that he is interested in evidence-based policymaking. The evidence is very clear that the impact is greatest at primary school level, and we would think that he would recognise that.

The purpose behind the early adopters is not simply to demonstrate to parents the difference that a Labour Government are bringing and a real difference to children's lives; they also allow us to test really effectively what works ahead of a full national roll-out. That is why we want to work with school leaders as part of this programme to ensure that all children are able to benefit from universal free breakfast clubs across our country, including children with SEND.

The Conservatives have no plan for education except preserving the tax breaks for students in private schools, whereas we have a plan to give every child the best start

in life. If they are going to spend the next five years defending their record, we will get on and deliver the change that this country voted for. We made a promise to the people of this country, and today we are delivering on the promise we made.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** I call the Chair of the Education Committee.

**Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab):** I thank the Secretary of State for her statement today. I welcome the news that St Luke's Church of England primary school in my constituency will be one of the early adopters of a universal breakfast club under the programme.

All too often, children with special educational needs and disabilities are excluded from extracurricular activities, and it is the parents of children with SEND who often find it the hardest to access childcare. It is essential that children with SEND have equal access to breakfast clubs in both mainstream and specialist schools. What steps are being taken to ensure that that is the case, that schools have the capacity to provide specialist staff where needed and that any additional home-to-school transport costs, which are often essential in enabling children with SEND physically to access a breakfast club, will be met?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Some 754 schools have been selected to take part in the early adopters scheme, of which 704 are mainstream schools and 50 are special schools and alternative provision settings. That is important, because we want to make sure that all children in time are able to benefit from the roll-out of breakfast clubs. We will work closely with schools and sector experts to develop the programme as we intend to roll it out. I really want to learn through the early adopter schools how we can best create a truly universal and inclusive breakfast school provision.

I recognise that delivering breakfast clubs may be particularly challenging for special and alternative provision schools. We have invited them to take part in the early adopters scheme so that we can make sure that, as we roll out across the country, including in mainstream schools, the needs of all children are properly catered for as part of the programme.

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

**Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD):** With three in 10 children growing up in poverty, any measure to tackle child hunger is to be welcomed to enable them to learn and flourish, so I congratulate the 750 schools selected as breakfast club early adopters. The learnings from those pilots will be absolutely critical as the Government seek to scale up the programme.

A number of questions that I have previously put to Ministers still stand, and I hope that the Secretary of State will address some of them. Many school leaders have raised concerns about the proposed funding rates, which are reportedly around 60p per child per day. If the pilots clearly show that those rates are insufficient, will Ministers commit to reviewing and increasing them? Schools simply cannot afford to make savings elsewhere, such as in teaching budgets.



Will Ministers review school food standards to ensure that breakfasts are specifically addressed, as the recent House of Lords report on childhood obesity recommended? What consideration has been given to how the 30 minutes of universal free childcare provision will interact with existing breakfast club provision? Most commuting parents need more than 30 minutes of childcare in the morning.

The Child Poverty Action Group has highlighted that breakfast clubs will probably secure only around 40% take-up. The most vulnerable children, especially those in temporary accommodation who travel long distances, may not make it to school in time for breakfast. The Children's Society has argued, as have the Liberal Democrats, that where money is scarce, we should target resources at those who most need them. As such, why will the Government not prioritise expanding eligibility for free school meals—a hot, healthy meal in the middle of the day when children are guaranteed to be in school—so that all children in poverty, whether in primary or secondary, are being fed? Is it not high time that Ministers introduced automatic enrolment into free school meals for all children?

Finally, on the Secretary of State's childcare announcements, can she confirm how much of that money will go into plugging the gap left by the rise in employer national insurance contributions, which will put significant pressure on providers and push up costs for parents?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her questions. Turning first to the question of funding, there has sadly been some misunderstanding about the funding rates, so I will set those out for the benefit of the House. In the summer term, funding will be paid in two parts: an up-front, one-off payment of £500 to cover initial set-up costs and, alongside that, a lump sum payment of £1,099 to cover fixed staffing costs for the summer term. That is in addition to the per pupil funding rates that exist in both mainstream and specialist provision; of course, rates will be higher in special schools, recognising the additional needs and staffing requirements that exist there. Schools will receive support to manage the requirements of the scheme, and will be provided with opportunities to learn from one another.

On food standards, we always seek to keep all those areas under review. We want to make sure that all the food served in our schools is healthy and nutritious, so that children are well fed and ready to learn. The school food statutory guidance, which regulates the food and drink provided in schools, already applies to breakfast. We want to ensure that healthy meals are offered as part of breakfast clubs, and we will continue to keep these areas under review.

The hon. Lady is right to ask about existing wraparound provision. We expect the two offers to be complementary; schools will be able to provide a paid-for offer alongside the 30 minutes of childcare and food through the universal offer. I note her concerns about child poverty, and strongly agree that there is a need for further action to tackle the shocking rates of child poverty we see in our country. That is why, together with the Work and Pensions Secretary, we are leading work across Government as part of the child poverty taskforce. We look forward to setting out further findings from that work in due course, including to this House. We are considering a

range of measures and ways in which we can support children out of poverty—the shocking legacy left behind by the last Conservative Government.

The hon. Lady asks about the additional investment going into the sector. The big investment that we are putting into the early years pupil premium and the expansion grant will be crucial to providing the support that the sector needs to deliver the places and staffing required ahead of September. I look forward to continuing to work with her to make sure we get this right.

**Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab):** I warmly welcome today's announcement of the breakfast club pilot areas, including the two schools in my constituency, which will make a massive difference to the lives of many working families. However, on the subject of breakfast clubs, as an SEN parent I would like to issue the plea, "Don't you forget about me." Too often, SEN parents and their children find that policy moves ahead without them, and there is a risk that we could be slightly overlooked in this area. What measures has the Secretary of State put in place to make sure that disabled children and those with additional needs can fully take part in breakfast clubs?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this important area. She is right that breakfast clubs must be fully inclusive and take account of the needs of all children, including children with SEND. That is why, as part of this process, we have announced 50 special and AP schools that will be taking part in the early adopters scheme. They will receive a higher funding rate of £3.23 a pupil, in addition to support for set-up costs and termly payments. I recognise the need to ensure that breakfast clubs operating in mainstream schools can cater to the needs of a wide range of children. That is why we are developing a toolkit for providers of wraparound care, including breakfast clubs, so that the provision that is put in place is inclusive for all children.

**Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con):** The Secretary of State makes a compelling argument on the merits of breakfast for many of our young children and the benefits that it has for learning. Can she say a word or two on two points? First, will she answer the question being raised in the secondary sector about future funding beyond the agreed time period? Secondly, what incentives can she put in place to encourage schools to procure foodstuffs that are produced locally? That would give good support to our local food producers and our farmers.

**Bridget Phillipson:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman about the importance of supporting local providers where that is possible and the fantastic contribution of British food and wider produce. I just observe that it is my understanding that his constituency is set to benefit from the early adopters scheme. I hope that he will be able to see the fantastic benefit that it will bring to children and families in his constituency. The national school breakfast programme will continue for the next year, but that covers only 75% of food. Schools are required to fund the additional 25% of costs. Our new breakfast clubs will be about more than just food; they will be about the wider opportunities that children in primary school will have at the start of the school day, and the costs will cover staffing, delivery and food.

**Darren Paffey** (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): I warmly welcome this statement and the firm actions that my right hon. Friend is taking to make sure that we can level the playing field and boost attendance and attainment for children in Southampton Itchen and beyond. I am particularly delighted that St John's primary and nursery school will get this investment from the Government as part of the early adopters programme. Will the Secretary of State detail what conversations she is having about how the monitoring will work, so that the national roll-out can be based on the best evidence? Ahead of perhaps 749 other invitations, may I invite her to visit St John's to see the breakfast club in action?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am delighted to hear about the good news for St John's. I am sure that the Minister for Early Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), and I will receive lots of invitations to visit fantastic breakfast clubs across our country. We will do our best to service those invitations, but with more than 750, it might be a bit of a stretch. We will try our very best. My hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen (Darren Paffey) is right to identify the need to develop learning and understanding about what works across the early adopters. That is why the schools taking part in this pilot cover a range of settings and serve communities with a range of different needs—both rural and urban—and of different kinds, so that we can ensure a fully representative sample ahead of full roll-out.

**Iqbal Mohamed** (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for her statement. As a child brought up on free milk and free school meals, I very much welcome and support the Government's plans to set up universal breakfast clubs in all primary schools. However, concerns are reported among headteachers, unions and charities that the plans will not be properly funded and will lack the flexibility required to be successful. This weekend, the independent publication *Schools Week* highlighted how some headteachers in primary schools, while enthusiastic about the aims, refused to take part in the early adopters pilot scheme as volunteer schools, because only 60p was being provided by the Government per pupil. The budgets of schools in my constituency of Dewsbury and Batley, as well as those across the country, are already stretched beyond breaking point. Will the Secretary of State therefore confirm that adequate funding for healthy foods, as well as the necessary flexibilities, will be provided to all primary schools for the breakfast clubs? Will she guarantee that schools will not be left out of pocket?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am confident that the funding being made available to schools will be sufficient to deliver on this programme. The hon. Gentleman quotes the daily per pupil funding rate, but alongside that, as I set out earlier, there will be start-up costs, as well as lump-sum payments to cover the costs of running breakfast clubs, alongside a higher daily funding rate for special schools and a higher daily funding rate based on the proportion of FSM6 pupils at the school.

**Mrs Sureena Brackenridge** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): First, my congratulations go to Pool Hayes primary school in Willenhall for being one of the 750 early adopters. Will the Secretary of State outline how the free universal roll-out of breakfast clubs, alongside

capping the number of branded items of uniform and expanding funded childcare, will help families in Wolverhampton North East with the cost of living?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am delighted that my hon. Friend's constituency is part of the early adopters programme. Our breakfast clubs scheme is all about making sure that children get a great start to their school day—a welcoming space that provides them with valuable opportunities to play, learn and socialise. However, as she identifies, the measures we are setting out to the House today on the early adopters scheme, as well as the measures in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, will also make a big difference to parents. They will put more money back into their pockets by limiting the costs of school uniform and providing more support around breakfast clubs. That is the difference a Labour Government make.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome very much the Secretary of State's commitment to the scheme. I know it is an England scheme, but we have a similar scheme in Northern Ireland. Every one of us as MPs has attended Kellogg's events in the House, and we understand the commitment that Kellogg's can make. Has the Secretary of State considered whether other companies could do similar to what Kellogg's does in relation to schools? For instance, bakeries and those who make jam or marmalade could do something. Indeed, we know that the superstores dump their food out or dispose of it within 24 hours. That is good food going to waste. There might be better ways. Perhaps she can help us to achieve that.

**Bridget Phillipson:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman that there is always more that we can do, and I note that many companies already involve themselves in important charitable works in this area. He names one company. It would be remiss of me, as a north-east MP, not to give a special plug to Greggs, which does fantastic work in this space, too. Alongside the national roll-out of breakfast clubs that we intend to deliver, we continue to believe that there is an important role for organisations such as Magic Breakfast, Greggs and Kellogg's in supporting schools and children.

**Mark Swards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I welcome the introduction of free breakfast clubs for all primary schools, including Robin Hood primary school in Leeds South West and Morley. Such clubs provide £450 of savings to parents and extra childcare, and we know that children should not have to start the day hungry. What can the Secretary of State tell the primary schools in my constituency about the full roll-out? When can they expect to see breakfast clubs in their schools?

**Bridget Phillipson:** We intend to deliver the roll-out as soon as possible, because we know it is urgent, and we know the difference it will make to children's lives. Free universal breakfast clubs will also mean that every primary school child, no matter their circumstances, is well prepared to learn. That is why we believe in that important provision being universal and available to all children. Today is an important step forward, and Robin Hood primary school will be an important part of how we develop and understand how to roll out the programme nationally.

**Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I agree with the Secretary of State that every single child deserves the best start in life, but if we are honest, we know that not every child has that. This programme will make such a big difference to so many children, including children at Van Gogh primary school, Henry Fawcett primary school and Crawford primary school in my constituency. The Secretary of State is always welcome to come and visit any of those three.

We know that this programme will make a big difference for many parents, too. One of the other pushes behind the free breakfast clubs is that they are really good for children's attainment and attendance. The early adopters start in April. What is the timeline for reviewing them, especially in light of some of the funding concerns that other Members have raised?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I strongly agree with my hon. Friend about the need to ensure that every child has the best start in life. I am grateful for her generous invitation, and I am sure that my hon. Friend the Early Education Minister and I will consider it along with, no doubt, a great many other invitations.

We intend to test and learn as we go along to ensure that the scheme is being rolled out effectively. This is a crucial part of ensuring that all children have opportunities at the start of the school day to play, to learn, to socialise and to benefit from that softer start. My hon. Friend was right to mention evidence from the Education Endowment Foundation which demonstrates the impact of breakfast clubs on attendance, attainment and behaviour, affecting not just the children who benefit but the whole school community.

**Josh Fenton-Glynn** (Calder Valley) (Lab): Stories of children arriving for lessons hungry are far too common in my constituency and across the country, and the issue was exacerbated by the massive rise in child poverty under the last Government. Because of the actions of this Labour Government, however, my constituency will see pilots in Cornholme junior, infant and nursery school, Scout Road academy, Elland Church of England junior, infant and nursery school, and Luddenden Church of England school. Will the Minister confirm that the child poverty strategy, when it is delivered, will build on that and make the scandal of children missing meals a thing of the past?

**Bridget Phillipson:** It is a privilege to co-chair the child poverty taskforce with my right hon. Friend the Work and Pensions Secretary. We have heard evidence across the country as a result of visits to Northern Ireland and Scotland—and will visit Wales shortly—to understand the challenges faced by so many families throughout the United Kingdom, and what is required to bring down the number of children growing up in poverty. We are considering a range of measures because of the dreadful record left by the Conservative Government: we have seen countless thousands of children grow up in avoidable poverty. The hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford), who is sitting on the Opposition Front Bench, can shake his head all he likes, but that is a fact.

**Peter Dowd** (Bootle) (Lab): I welcome the statement, and it will also be welcomed by the families of children attending St Monica's Catholic primary school and King's Lander primary academy. We look forward to

the extension and expansion of my right hon. Friend's proposals. Does she agree that they are food for thought in the most literal and practical sense of the term?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am delighted to hear about the schools in my hon. Friend's constituency that are taking part in the scheme. They will play a crucial role in how we find the most effective way of delivering this on a national basis. I believe it is essential for all children to arrive at school ready to learn, with full bellies and hungry minds.

**Nesil Caliskan** (Barking) (Lab): Parents and teachers in my constituency will welcome the statement, as will, in particular, Monteagle and Richard Alibon primary schools, which are part of the early roll-out. The Secretary of State referred briefly to the evidence-based relationship between those who attend breakfast clubs and attainment; that is particularly important in my constituency, where 19% of children are frequently absent. Can she give us some more details about the evidence of a link between attendance at breakfast clubs and long-term school attendance?

**Bridget Phillipson:** My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the significant challenges relating to attendance. Breakfast clubs are an important part of support for children in respect of behaviour, attendance and attainment, and the evidence is very clear in that regard. I pay tribute to the school leaders and staff who will be involved in this important endeavour to support children at the start of the school day: their efforts will allow us to effectively roll out a national scheme that will benefit children the length and breadth of our country, and I am grateful for their contribution.

**Matt Rodda** (Reading Central) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her important policy announcement, and I thank her in particular for the investment in Caversham Park and St Anne's Catholic primary schools in my constituency. Can she give any further details of the evaluation of the programme over time?

**Bridget Phillipson:** We will update the House to ensure that Members are aware of the continuation of the roll-out and its progress, but also so that we can learn how it is progressing as quickly and effectively as possible. I am delighted to hear about the schools in my hon. Friend's constituency.

**Perran Moon** (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Gwinear Community primary school is one of the 750 early adopters, and I am extremely pleased that they have joined in. Does the Secretary of State agree that this is part of an overall strategy to ensure that all children can gain access to the education that they deserve—a strategy that has been profoundly missing for the last 14 years?

**Bridget Phillipson:** As my hon. Friend says, breakfast clubs are an important part of ensuring that all children are set up to succeed and every child has the best start in life, but we need to go much further, and, indeed, we are doing so as a Labour Government. We are seeking to break the link between background and success, so that more children than ever—a record proportion—are school-ready at the age of five. As we all know, the evidence points to the fact that children who slip behind at that crucial moment suffer later in life, and I want to ensure that every child in the country has the chance to get on.



**Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): I am delighted that Denbigh primary school and Someries infant school are two of the first schools to benefit from Labour's universal free breakfast clubs. We know that a balanced, nutritious breakfast will set children up for the school day and improve attendance and attainment. Does the Secretary of State agree that Labour's delivery on its manifesto commitment, through our plan for change, is clear evidence that we are committed to breaking down barriers to opportunity and ensuring that all children have the best chance in life?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I do agree with my hon. Friend. The need for action is urgent. We know that far too many children are not achieving all that they can, and are held back by virtue of their backgrounds. We are determined to turn that around, and the announcement I have made today shows the determination of this Labour Government to ensure that background is no barrier to success. I am delighted that we have made such rapid progress, with more than 750 early adopters from April.

**Adam Thompson** (Erewash) (Lab): I welcome the statement, and I am very glad that Chaucer infant and nursery school in my constituency signed up to the early adopters scheme. When I had the great privilege of visiting the school recently, Miss Dawley gave me an excellent tour and I had a fantastic discussion with the smart school council about its priorities for our community. Free breakfast clubs will provide a real financial boost for families in my constituency, who have struggled greatly as a result of the cost of living crisis. Will the Secretary of State say more about how they will improve the opportunities available to children in Erewash?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I send my best wishes to Miss Dawley and to the whole school community. They are clearly doing fantastic work to support children in my hon. Friend's area. Of course breakfast clubs in primary schools bring benefits to parents at the start of the school day, giving them choices and flexibility at work, but, critically, this is about boosting children's life chances. The evidence is very clear about the impact on attendance, behaviour and attainment. This is a crucial part of ensuring that background is no barrier to getting on in life.

**Tulip Siddiq** (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be well aware of the impact of covid on the wellbeing and attainment of children who are now at primary school, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This welcome intervention will make a massive difference to that covid cohort, but may I press the Secretary of State on the next steps for them, in terms of attainment but also mental health? What is her Department doing to ensure that there is more mental health provision, especially in primary schools?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I think we all recognise, both as constituency Members and from the work that we see taking place across the country, the serious impact of the pandemic on young people and their mental health and the long waiting lists for specialist support from child and adolescent mental health services. I am working closely with the Health Secretary to ensure that we roll

out more mental health support throughout our schools so that children have access to the support that they need at the earliest possible point.

**Alex Baker** (Aldershot) (Lab): I am delighted that four schools in my constituency are taking part in the scheme—The Ferns primary academy and Farnborough Grange nursery/infant community school in Farnborough, and St Joseph's Catholic primary school in Aldershot. What is my right hon. Friend's message to parents in my constituency who are eager for their children's school to join the scheme so that they can benefit from Labour's plan for change in Aldershot and Farnborough?

**Bridget Phillipson:** My message to parents in Aldershot and across our country is that this Labour Government are on their side and delivering better work choices for them, and more support for their children at the start of the school day, when it comes to breakfast clubs and the early adopters scheme. We are also taking action to cut the cost of school uniforms—an area that I know many parents find a real pressure—and expanding childcare and early years entitlement, so that parents across our country, including in my hon. Friend's constituency, are able to take up the places that have been promised.

**Alistair Strathern** (Hitchin) (Lab): As a former teacher and local authority children's lead, I got to see at first hand the transformative impact that breakfast clubs can have in driving up attendance, attainment and young people's wellbeing, so I am delighted that not one, not two, but three local schools will benefit from the Government's early adopters scheme. As excited as I am for primary-age pupils at Meppershall, Shefford lower and Etonbury academy in Stotfold, I want to make sure that even more can benefit. How will the Government make sure that we learn the lessons of the pilots as quickly as possible, so that every pupil in my constituency and across the country who is eligible for the commitment can benefit from it?

**Bridget Phillipson:** The schools in my hon. Friend's constituency will play an important role in determining how we can roll out this commitment right across our country. Of course, the early adopters in his community will make a really meaningful difference to parents and children, but they will also give us the opportunity to test and learn as we go and, crucially, to demonstrate the impact of a universal breakfast club offer. We know that that is the way we can make sure that we reach some of the families that might find it more difficult to access such provision, because it is a less stigmatising way of reaching those in greatest need.

**Pippa Heylings** (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): I thank and congratulate the headteachers and staff at Meldreth, Great Wilbraham and Stapleford primary schools in my constituency. Will the Minister explain to them how important it is that the learning that takes place in those schools will ensure the roll-out of breakfast clubs to all schools in my constituency and across the country?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I pay tribute to the schools in the hon. Lady's constituency, and to the workforce there, for the fantastic efforts that they have made in order to take part in this scheme. I look forward to seeing the impact it has in schools in her community and in

constituencies across the country, so that we can make sure that when we roll out this scheme nationwide, we do so on the basis of the best available evidence, taken from a range of different contexts in different constituencies across England.

**Josh Simons** (Makerfield) (Lab): As a newly elected Member of this place, I try to visit a school in my constituency every week. Time and again, parents tell me, as they did last week at Hindley All Saints primary, that having a child in this country is too expensive and too exhausting, which is why I really welcome the programme that the Secretary of State has set out today. In a few weeks' time, I am hosting a coffee morning at the family hub in Hindley, where parents are coming to discuss the issues that they face, particularly dads, who often do not show up to these things. Will the Secretary of State assure the House that she will tightly monitor the timeline for rolling out this fantastic programme beyond the early adopters and to other schools that will benefit, including those in my constituency?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his work in his community to support families. He is right to suggest that all parents experience challenges at different points. Being a parent is a wonderful job, but it can also be a very challenging job at times, and the Government are determined to make sure that support is always available to families. We want to ensure that as we roll out this programme across the country as quickly as we can, we learn the lessons about what works in different parts of our country. I give my hon. Friend my commitment that the action that we are taking as a Government will benefit families right across his constituency. We are taking action on school uniform costs, rolling out childcare and early years entitlements, and making sure that children have more early and timely access to support in areas like SEND.

**Mr Richard Quigley** (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend think that a breakfast club might have helped the attendance on the Opposition Benches and, indeed, the Conservatives' grasp of basic maths? Does my right hon. Friend agree that Barton primary school in my constituency of Isle of Wight West has taken an important step forward in improving the outcomes for all its pupils, and that this is one of the many important first steps that she is taking to fix an education system that has been ruined by the previous Government?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Attendance has been a bit slim on the Opposition Benches this afternoon. In my response to the shadow Minister, I said that one would think that Members from across the House would welcome the difference that breakfast clubs will make to communities the length and breadth of our country, because they have been selected in a range of different constituencies to ensure that we learn from what is effective and what works. I am delighted that my hon. Friend's constituency will be part of this scheme. The work that school leaders, teachers and staff will carry out in this important endeavour will allow us to roll out breakfast clubs, making a real difference to children across our country.

**Lewis Atkinson** (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I know that my right hon. Friend and constituency neighbour, the Secretary of State, is personally committed to delivering the best start to life for children in Sunderland, and I warmly welcome the fact that the Richard Avenue,

Hudson Road, St Joseph's and Dame Dorothy schools in my constituency have been announced as early adopters. Will she say a little bit about regional variation in the availability of early years staff, which, as she knows, is a particular challenge in our city?

**Bridget Phillipson:** My hon. Friend is right to identify the variation that exists across our country, including when it comes to early years places and provision. We have almost doubled the early years pupil premium to make sure that providers are supported to create places in communities that are in greatest need, but where places do not currently exist in the way that we would wish.

When it comes to the staffing of breakfast clubs, I am delighted that schools in Sunderland Central will benefit. It will be for schools to determine how best to use the funding to staff breakfast clubs, and there is no expectation that it should be carried out by teachers. Existing breakfast clubs use a mixture of provision, which will continue, and the early adopters will allow us to test and learn, and to strengthen delivery, as part of a national roll-out.

**Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for giving families in Carlisle not one, not two, but seven reasons to be cheerful today. Those seven reasons are the schools of Yewdale, Inglewood, Blackford, Hallbankgate, Bishop Harvey Goodwin, Castle Carrock and Brook Street. These seven schools represent the full breadth, potential and diversity of Carlisle and north Cumbria, from the inner-city school of Brook Street, where many families have English as a second language and where opportunity is all too often denied to the children, to village schools such as Castle Carrick and Hallbankgate, where dropping off at school time can mean that parents cannot take advantage of the opportunities that exist in the city. Will the Secretary of State say a little more about the opportunity that will be unlocked for parents as a result of today's announcement?

**Bridget Phillipson:** My hon. Friend is right to highlight the fact that the early adopters scheme covers schools serving a wide range of settings and communities. We have sought to ensure that there is a representative sample—large and small—of those serving communities with higher levels of deprivation and those with lower levels. The early adopters scheme that we are introducing will have real benefits for parents in Carlisle, including by offering the flexibility at the start of the school day to drop off children a bit earlier, and to take on more hours at work or to get to work. The scheme will make a difference to children's life chances too, because the evidence is so clear that a softer start to the school day makes a big difference to children's attendance, their behaviour and, crucially, their attainment at school.

**Alice Macdonald** (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome today's announcement, and I am very pleased to see that St Williams primary and Kinsale infant school in my constituency of Norwich North will be among those that benefit from the early adopters programme—they are two of the 12 schools in Norfolk that will benefit. Will the Secretary of State expand on the "test and learn" principle? As we feed that in nationally, how will we feed it back to schools on an ongoing basis so that they can make improvements, and are there opportunities for schools to join up locally in areas such as procurement?

**Bridget Phillipson:** We will provide the opportunities that my hon. Friend outlines to ensure that schools work with one another to develop best practice, to learn from what works in similar settings, and to make sure that breakfast clubs in those schools are as effective and accessible as they can be. We know that breakfast clubs make a really big difference to children and their life chances, and I am delighted that the Government have been able to move so rapidly in starting the roll-out across our country.

**Alison Hume** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): It is shameful that after the last Labour Government lifted 1.1 million children out of poverty, years of neglect by Conservative Governments saw an increasing number of children going to school hungry, which limits their learning and life chances. I warmly welcome the announcement that four schools in my constituency will be able to offer a free breakfast club from April: Ruswarp and Fylingdales, as well as St Peter's and St George's over in Scarborough. Does my right hon. Friend agree that these breakfast clubs show how this Government are not only supporting working parents, but delivering on our promise to tackle child poverty?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Opposition Members never like to have it pointed out to them that on their watch we saw rising levels of child poverty in our country, which have scarred the life chances of a generation and have left families struggling. As a Labour Government, we are determined to make a difference and to ensure that background is no barrier to getting on in life. I am grateful that my hon. Friend is such a champion for her constituents in making sure that where people are from does not determine everything they can go on to achieve. The fact that we are delivering on our commitments, not even eight months into this Labour Government, demonstrates the difference that voting Labour makes.

**Sojan Joseph** (Ashford) (Lab): I welcome this announcement, under which my constituents in Ashford will benefit from free breakfast clubs in three schools: Downs View infants school, Kingsnorth primary school and Chilmington primary school. Giving children a chance to settle down and start their day at a club with friends will have a positive long-term impact on their mental health. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this needs to be rolled out to every primary school as soon as possible?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I agree, and we will do so as quickly as we can. My hon. Friend is right to highlight the important benefits that breakfast clubs deliver by enabling children to socialise and play at the start of the school day. I have seen so many fantastic examples of breakfast clubs already in operation that make such a profound difference to children by giving them a chance to spend time with friends, play and learn ahead of starting the school day, as well as the crucial boost that having a healthy breakfast delivers.

**Andrew Cooper** (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): I am delighted that five schools in my constituency—Hartford Manor, Over Hall, Winsford High Street, Victoria Road and St Joseph's—will be among the first to offer breakfast clubs. I pay tribute to the leaders of those schools, who, by putting forward their schools, will ensure that children

in my area start the day ready to learn. The evidence suggests that this will improve attainment, increase attendance and enhance wellbeing, while boosting those children's overall life chances. To ensure that all children can benefit from free breakfast clubs, can my right hon. Friend tell me what steps are being taken to ensure that breakfast clubs are inclusive and accessible for children with SEND?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the school leaders in his community, who will be a part—a very important part—of our early adopters scheme. I thank them for their contribution. He is right to highlight the important need for all breakfast clubs to be inclusive, including for children with SEND, which is why, through this process, we will be able to learn from what works. It is also why, alongside announcements about breakfast clubs in mainstream schools, we are announcing specialist provision—alternative provision schools will be a part of this—so that we can learn from the best practice that exists in the specialist sector and ensure that mainstream schools can also develop it.

**Tom Collins** (Worcester) (Lab): There is no doubt that this Government's introduction of free breakfast clubs will be transformative for many families. Worcester has always been a pioneering city, and as a city that trains teachers, we are a hub for education, so I am particularly pleased at today's announcement that no fewer than three of our local schools—Oasis, Red Hill and Riversides—have been selected as early adopters of breakfast clubs. Will the Secretary of State elaborate on how this pilot contributes to ending poverty and ensuring that every child has the opportunity to thrive, achieve and succeed?

**Bridget Phillipson:** The children and families at my hon. Friend's schools in Worcester will benefit directly from the early adopters programme, but they will also be an important part of how we roll out this scheme nationwide, allowing us to develop best practice. I pay tribute to the schools and their leaders in his community for taking part in the scheme. He is absolutely right that we want to ensure that all children are set up to succeed at the start of the school day, so that they can achieve, thrive and succeed in every way possible.

**Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): Parents and families of children at Knockhall primary school in Greenhithe in my constituency will be delighted to hear that it is a breakfast club early adopter. This will ensure that pupils start their day well fed and ready to learn, and it will save families money. Will the Secretary of State say a little more about how the learning, nutritional and cost-of-living benefits will be evaluated?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Through the early adopters programme, schools will be able to take part in a peer-to-peer support network, so that they can work together to share expertise and approaches at a regional level, which will be crucial to the work we take forward on the national roll-out. The school in my hon. Friend's constituency will not just play a role in supporting families locally; it will be an essential part of how we learn what works and what is most effective. We want to ensure that best practice is spread across the country as we roll out breakfast clubs nationwide.



**David Baines** (St Helens North) (Lab): I am delighted that three schools in my constituency—Ashurst primary, Garswood primary and PACE—are part of this initial roll-out, and I am delighted for them. I was also delighted to hear Carr Mill primary school in my constituency get a mention by the Secretary of State in her statement. I congratulate Mr Maley, the headteacher, and all the staff on the outstanding work they are clearly already doing—I know they are doing it, because I used to work there, and it is a great school.

Like many Members, I have already been contacted today by other families and schools to ask when they can be part of this scheme. Can the Secretary of State assure me and my constituents that the Government will work as quickly as possible to roll it out to all primary schools? Can she also assure my constituents who are concerned about school funding that schools will be properly resourced to deliver this, as well as everything else they have to do?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I can say to my hon. Friend's constituents and those across St Helens that we will ensure that schools have the resources they need to deliver the roll-out of breakfast clubs, both for early adopters and beyond. As we get this initial phase under way, it is essential that we learn what works ahead of the national roll-out. We are determined to roll out breakfast clubs nationwide as quickly as possible, but the fact that we can announce the early adopters scheme starting from April demonstrates the difference that a Labour Government make.

**Luke Myer** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I strongly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, and I cannot tell her how delighted I am that four schools in my constituency, with over 1,300 children, will be early adopters under this scheme. I pay tribute to the leaders of Skelton primary, Lockwood primary, Pennyman primary and St Bernadette's primary for their leadership. Does my right hon. Friend agree with me that, as far as children of working families are concerned, this Government are on their side and focused on making sure they have the best start in life and the best start to the school day?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am delighted that four schools in my hon. Friend's constituency are taking part, and I look forward to all primary schools across Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland benefiting from the roll-out of breakfast clubs across our country. This Labour Government are on the side of working parents, putting more money back into parents' pockets, supporting parents at the start of the school day and cutting the costs of the school day. That is the difference that a Labour Government bring, and that is the difference that electing my hon. Friend to this place brings.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** I thank the Secretary of State for her statement.

## Points of Order

6.27 pm

**Sir Roger Gale** (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. First, I should declare a non-pecuniary interest as a freeman of the City of London. A constituent has raised with me the concern that the City of London is seeking by means of a private Bill—the City of London (Markets) Bill—the ability to sell and redevelop without replacement the historic meat market of Smithfield and the fish market of Billingsgate. A petition against this proposal with many hundreds of signatures has been denied an audience and blocked by the corporation on the grounds that the petitioners do not have a direct interest in the proposed legislation. Smithfield and Billingsgate have for centuries provided meat and fish that is consumed throughout the country, and it is therefore fair to argue that every citizen of the United Kingdom has a direct interest in these markets, for which the corporation has acquired and prepared alternative sites that it is now seeking to abandon. My question to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, is: is it correct, proper and orderly that the petition against this Bill should not be heard?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** I thank the right hon. Member for giving prior notice of his point of order. The right of petitioners to be heard before a Committee on a private Bill is not a matter for the Chair. None the less, he has put his point on the record, and hon. Members who wish to object to the Bill will have an opportunity to do so when it returns to the Floor of the House on Report.

**Perran Moon** (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Today is the third anniversary of the start of the war in Ukraine. During the Ukraine statement, several Members were asking where certain other Members were for that vital debate. Up to now, the House has been rock solid in its overwhelming support for Ukraine. It may interest Madam Deputy Speaker to know that the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) is not actually in the United States, and he is not in Clacton-on-Sea. He is 290 miles away, in my constituency, holding a rally. Should he not have asked me first?

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving notice of his point of order. I assume he has notified the hon. Member to whom he is referring.

**Perran Moon** indicated assent.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** The document called "Rules of behaviour and courtesies in the House of Commons" deals with this matter. When a Member visits another Member's constituency, except on a purely private visit, they should take reasonable steps in advance to tell the Member in whose constituency the visit is taking place. That guidance also states that failing to do so is regarded by colleagues as "very discourteous". The hon. Gentleman has put his point on the record.

## Crown Estate Bill [Lords]

*Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee*

### New Clause 1

#### MANAGEMENT OF THE CROWN ESTATE IN WALES

“(1) Within two years of the day on which this Act is commenced, the Treasury must have completed a transfer of the responsibility of the management of the Crown Estate in Wales to the Welsh Government.

(2) The Treasury may by regulations make provision about the transfer of the responsibility of the management of the Crown Estate in Wales relating to reserved measures as it considers necessary or expedient, including—

- (a) in the interests of defence or national security,
- (b) in connection with maintaining and developing telecommunications and wireless telegraphy, and
- (c) in connection with maintaining and developing the transmission or distribution of electricity or the provision or use of electricity interconnectors.

(3) The Treasury must by regulations make provision to ensure that the employment of any person in Crown employment is not adversely affected by the transfer of responsibility under this section.

(4) A statutory instrument containing regulations under subsections (2) and (3) may not be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before and approved by a resolution of each House of Parliament.”—(*Llinos Medi*.)

*This new clause places a duty on the Treasury to transfer management of the Crown Estate in Wales to the Welsh Government within two years of the commencement of the Act and take measures by resolution to secure arrangements for reserved matters such as defence and national security, telecommunications, and the national grid, and to ensure that employees of the Crown Estate are not adversely affected by the transfer.*

*Brought up, and read the First time.*

6.31 pm

**Llinos Medi** (Ynys Môn) (PC): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

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

**New clause 2—Marine Spatial Planning: coordination—**

“In relation to any decisions made about marine spatial priorities, the Crown Estate must—

- (a) ensure that the decisions are coordinated with the priorities of the Marine Maritime Organisation, and
- (b) consult any communities or industries impacted by the plans, including fishing communities.”

*Marine plans guide marine use and regulation for sustainable development, balancing the environment, economy, and society. This new clause ensures the Crown Estate collaborates with DEFRA's Marine Spatial Prioritisation through the MMO, using its expertise to inform decisions, preventing conflicts of interest from its new borrowing and investment powers.*

**New clause 3—Sustainable development: community benefits—**

“(1) Before making any investment decision, the Commissioners must assess—

- (a) plans for community benefits for local communities, and
- (b) plans for community benefits for coastal communities of offshore activities.

(2) In section 3(1) of the Crown Estate Act 1961, at end insert—

“(1A) The Commissioners must transfer at least 5 per cent of all net profit generated from the Crown Estate's activities to local communities impacted by those activities.”

*This new clause would require the Commissioners to ensure their activities benefit local communities, including coastal communities, and that 5% of any profits would be transferred to local communities.*

**New clause 4—Devolution of Crown Estate powers to Wales—**

“(1) The Crown Estate Act 1961 is amended as follows.

(2) After section 7 (powers of Minister of Works in Regent's Park) insert—

‘7A Commissioners’ functions in Wales

(1) The Treasury must set out a scheme to transfer all the existing Welsh functions of the Crown Estate Commissioners (“the Commissioners”) to the Welsh Ministers or a person nominated by Welsh Ministers.

(2) The existing Welsh functions under subsection (1) are the Commissioners’ functions relating to the part of the Crown Estate that, immediately before the transfer date, consists of—

- (a) property, rights or interests in land in Wales, and
- (b) rights in relation to the Welsh zone.

(3) The Secretary of State must by regulations set a date to implement the scheme under subsection (1) to the transfer of functions to the Welsh Ministers or a person nominated by Welsh Ministers.

(4) A statutory instrument containing regulations under subsection (3) is subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of either House of Parliament.”

*This new clause would require the Treasury to devolve Welsh functions of the Crown Estate Commissioners to Welsh Ministers or a person nominated by Welsh Ministers.*

**New clause 5—Limit on the disposal of assets—**

“After section 3 of the Crown Estate Act 1961, insert—

‘3A Limit on the disposal of assets

(1) The Commissioners must inform the Treasury if the disposal of assets of the Crown Estate will be of a value totalling 10% or more of the Crown Estate's total assets in a single year.

(2) The Treasury must approve of any disposal of assets above the threshold in subsection (1) and the Chancellor of the Exchequer must lay a report before Parliament within 28 days of being notified by the Commissioners.”

*This new clause requires the Crown Estate Commissioners to notify and seek HM Treasury approval for the disposal of assets totalling 10% or more of the Crown Estate's total assets.*

**New clause 6—Partnership agreement: the Crown Estate and Great British Energy—**

“The Chancellor of the Exchequer must lay before Parliament any partnership agreement between the Crown Estate and Great British Energy.”

*This new clause requires the Chancellor of the Exchequer to lay before Parliament any partnership agreement between the Crown Estate and Great British Energy.*

**Amendment 1, clause 1, page 1, line 26, at end insert—**

“(3) The Treasury must by regulations limit borrowing to a net debt to asset value ratio of no more than 25 per cent.

(4) A statutory instrument containing regulations under subsection (3) may not be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before and approved by a resolution of each House of Parliament.”

*This amendment would limit the amount the Commissioners may borrow by regulations.*

**Amendment 4, page 1, line 26, at end insert—**

“(3) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must limit borrowing by the Crown Estate under this section by regulations made by statutory instrument, and these regulations may not be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before and approved by a resolution of each House of Parliament.

(4) The first set of regulations made under subsection (3) must limit borrowing to a net debt to asset value ratio of no more than 25 per cent.”

*This amendment would limit the amount the Commissioners may borrow by regulations subject to the affirmative procedure for statutory instruments.*

Amendment 2, clause 3, page 2, line 17, at end insert—

“(3B) Any framework document published by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Crown Estate and the Commissioners must define ‘sustainable development’ for the purposes of this Act.

(3C) The definition under subsection (3B) must include reference to a climate and nature duty.

(3D) A ‘climate and nature duty’ means a duty to achieve any targets set out under Part 1 of the Climate Change Act 2008 or under sections 1 to 3 of the Environment Act 2021.”

*This amendment would ensure that this act’s Framework Agreement must define “sustainable development”, and that the definition must include reference to a climate and nature duty.*

Amendment 3, page 2, line 17, at end insert—

“(3B) In pursuit of the objective under subsection 3A, the Commissioners must assess the adequacy of protections against coastal erosion in areas affected by their offshore activities.”

*This amendment would require the Commissioners to assess the protections against coastal erosion in areas where landfall is made for offshore projects.*

Amendment 5, page 2, line 17, at end insert—

“(3B) In keeping the impact of their activities under review, the Commissioners must have regard to

- (a) the United Kingdom’s Net Zero targets;
- (b) regional economic growth; and
- (c) ensuring resilience in respect of energy security.”

*This new sub-section would require the Crown Estate Commissioners, in reviewing the impact of their activities on the achievement of sustainable development, to have specific regard to the United Kingdom’s Net Zero targets, regional economic growth, and resilience in respect of energy security.*

**Llinos Medi:** New clause 1 transfers the management of the Crown Estate in Wales to the Welsh Government within two years of the commencement of the Act. The principle behind it is simple: the people of Wales should control and benefit from their own natural resources. For much of Welsh history, that has not been the case, with resources often exploited for the benefit of others. From copper in Amlwch in Ynys Môn, slate in Gwynedd, steel in Port Talbot and Newport, to the coal across the south-east valleys, the rivers of wealth that flowed from those industries were sucked out of our communities—and those communities have since been ravaged by poverty.

Wales is blessed with natural wealth and brilliant people, yet we are also a nation afflicted with deprivation, following years of extraction. Shocking new figures show that child poverty in Wales is set to reach 34.4% by the end of the decade. That is the legacy of our past, in which wealth generated was not used to benefit the Welsh economy or communities. Today, in 2025, that extractive pattern is being repeated with Wales’s green wealth.

Wales has immense renewable energy potential in our windy seas and long coastlines—we can see that demonstrated in the Morlais project on Ynys Môn—but the seabed, along with thousands of acres of land, is controlled by the Crown Estate. Renewable energy projects using these resources are expanding rapidly and delivering profits. We see that in the value of the Crown Estate, which sky-rocketed from £96 million five years ago to £853 million in 2023. However, all profits generated by the Crown Estate in Wales are transferred to the Treasury. This green wealth, just like the wealth from coal and other minerals in the past, is being sucked out of our nation. Millions of pounds generated on the Welsh Crown Estate is taken out of Wales each year, away from our communities who have borne the brunt of decades of economic decline.

In 2017, Scotland gained control over the Scottish Crown Estate and ensured that all profit was kept in Scotland. Devolution has generated millions for the Scottish public purse, with funds going directly to deprived communities such as those in the highlands. Why do the Scottish people get the benefit from their own water, wind and sea resources, but the people of Wales cannot? It is simply not credible for the Government to continue to say that devolution is too complicated, too costly and too time-consuming. These are all issues that can be addressed with proper planning and resourcing. Scotland’s Crown Estate was devolved in 2017. It is ludicrous to say that the Welsh Crown Estate cannot be devolved in a similar way. In Scotland, interim measures were put in place to ensure a smooth transition from the point of devolution until the implementation of a long-term framework for managing assets. New clause 1 takes a similar pragmatic approach by introducing a transition period. It worked in Scotland; it can work for Wales, too.

Throughout this whole debate, the Government have still not addressed the principle of control, so I would like the Minister to answer directly: do his Government believe that the people of Wales should have democratic control over their own natural resources? The people of Wales certainly believe so. Polling shows that majority support among the Welsh public for the devolution of the Crown Estate is higher than ever. It is also supported by the Welsh Labour Government. A majority of councils in Wales have passed motions in support of devolution; Wrexham council did so just last week, with the support of its Labour group. More councils will follow suit, and we may very likely have all councils in Wales declaring support for devolution in the near future. There is a mandate from right across Welsh society for devolution. Members of Parliament would do well to remember that they are here to serve and represent the people, and that the people of Wales have clearly made their views known on this matter.

In closing, I return to the principle that I outlined at the beginning of my speech. Do Members of this House believe that the people of Wales should, after centuries of exploitation, finally be given the right to control and benefit from their own natural resources? If they believe in that principle, I urge them to join me in the voting Lobby.

**Henry Tufnell** (Mid and South Pembrokeshire) (Lab): We live in uncertain times, and as a nation we face many challenges ahead. For one, there is Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. The impact on our domestic energy prices has



[Henry Tufnell]

shown the extent of our reliance on the international oil and gas markets. Since 2022, gas prices for households across the country have spiked, and the cost of living continues to bite. Putin's boot is on our throat.

Another challenge is the result of rapid deindustrialisation across the UK since the 1980s, and too much economic focus on London and south-east England. We have seen massive job losses at Port Talbot; we face an uncertain future at Grangemouth; and we still bear the scars of the loss of the mining industry. Regional inequality is stark, and in my constituency of Mid and South Pembrokeshire, the rate of child poverty is steadily increasing.

And of course there is our climate crisis: wildfires in California, torrential rain in Spain, and extreme heatwaves and longer droughts. Even walking through the village of Angle in Pembrokeshire with members of the local community council, it is all too easy to see the increase in frequency of flooding, not to mention its damaging impact on residents and local farmers.

Prior to the general election of 4 July, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor set out her economic vision of securonomics: we would make, sell and buy more in Britain, and so deliver energy security and create good, well-paid jobs while tackling the climate crisis. My Labour colleagues and I stood for election on that manifesto, and it is time to deliver. At a time when the challenges are so great and the need for leadership is so acute, it is vital that the Crown Estate has greater scope to rise to those challenges and do its part for the revitalisation of our great nation.

The provision in clause 3 that commissioners at the Crown Estate

"must keep under review the impact of their activities on the achievement of sustainable development in the United Kingdom" is therefore to be welcomed. That amendment was hard fought for by the noble Lords in the other place, and I commend them for it. However, it is our duty in this House to provide clarity about the meaning and scope of "sustainable development", and about the mechanism for enforcing that provision. Maintaining transparency and accountability is critical for an organisation as big and influential as the Crown Estate. Allowing the estate to define "sustainable development" and report annually is a move straight out of the environmental, social and governance playbook. Given the financial firepower that this House is granting the Crown Estate, allowing it to effectively self-regulate on an issue of national importance is a dereliction of our democratic duty.

Under amendment 5, the commissioners must have regard to net zero, regional economic growth and energy security. It would not impede the independence of the Crown Estate, but would provide unambiguous purpose and direction on an otherwise undefined and unexplained term. It should therefore be welcomed.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Of course, a key issue for all of us in the United Kingdom, and certainly for us in Northern Ireland, is the fishing sector. Any net zero development, such as a wind farm—wind farms have been proposed for my constituency in the past—could have a direct impact on the fishing sector there. Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that the fishing sector could be impacted by measures that take away

the opportunity to fish in the seas around this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, to the detriment of those in the sector, and their families?

**Henry Tufnell:** The fishing industry has a great history in my constituency, and it is vital that the Crown Estate takes on board the issues in the fishing industry when it looks at leasing and consenting. I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention.

I am grateful also to the Minister for his assurances in Committee that the public framework document will give context to clause 3, on sustainable development. However, no text has yet been shared with this House, nor will any be shared until after the Bill receives Royal Assent. This reduces scrutiny and will encourage a retrospective review, rather than a proactive approach. Furthermore, relying on a public framework document reduces this House's ability to ensure that the clause is properly enforced. What is the mechanism for enforcement in the event of non-compliance? What if the Crown Estate failed to report in good faith—what would the penalties be?

Off the back of Labour's resounding victory last July, we know there is democratic consensus across the nation on our economic vision, which promotes energy security, regional economic growth and net zero, yet the Crown Estate appeared to be relying on the window dressing of ESG standards to obfuscate its desire to maximise its 12% of profits, at the expense of our nation.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful argument, and I share his concern for communities such as Milford Haven, in which renewable development will be critical in future. I am sure he will also agree that devolution of the Crown Estate would be a key way to make the best use of supply chains, and to ensure that money stays as local as possible, particularly in Wales.

**Henry Tufnell:** I thank the right hon. Lady for her intervention. I sometimes feel, though, that the ideas of her party are slightly for the birds. The idea of devolution—where is their plan? There is no plan. What are the practicalities?

**Ben Lake** (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): I thank my friend and constituency neighbour for giving way. The plan is quite simple: we could look at what is happening at this very moment in Scotland.

**Henry Tufnell:** The issue, though, is the practicalities. Is the hon. Gentleman going to draw an artificial line in the Celtic sea? What about the issue of consenting? What would that do for the leasing rounds, when certainty of investment for the private sector is so critical at this stage?

Furthermore, other Government agencies and Departments have to take account of this economic vision. In its latest contract for difference round, the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero set a criterion of achieving shorter supply chains, in order to ensure that manufacturing facilities, installation firms and ports are located in areas of deprivation. It also adheres to science-based targets, which are goals that businesses set to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions in line with obligations under international treaties, so that we can reach net zero by 2050.

The national wealth fund has an overall goal of increasing investment in resilient and sustainable infrastructure to support the UK's net zero transition, and to contribute to improved local economic opportunity and productivity. In partnering with the private sector and local government, the national wealth fund has two clear strategic objectives: to tackle climate change and to support regional and local economic growth.

Great British Energy facilitates, encourages and participates in the production, distribution, storage and supply of clean energy, the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions, improvements in energy efficiency and measures for ensuring the security of energy supply.

6.45 pm

In providing clarity of purpose, this House is not overreaching and dictating individual organisational decisions; instead, it is setting out a broader direction of travel, based on the democratic will of the people of this great country. In my constituency, people are desperately in need of that radical intervention to address the high levels of social deprivation and bring back economic prosperity.

To be clear, I support the Bill. However, in order for this Government to deliver on their election manifesto, the Crown Estate must be given clear purpose and direction that are directly aligned with the Prime Minister's plan for change.

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

**James Wild** (North West Norfolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak on Report, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will focus on amendment 4 and new clauses 5 and 6, which I tabled.

The Bill was developed under the previous Conservative Government to increase the Crown Estate's ability to compete by providing a broader power to borrow, in order to maintain and enhance the value of the estate and the income derived from it. The assets managed by the Crown Estate, which total £15.5 billion, are not the property of the Government, nor are they part of the sovereign's private estate; they are held in right of the Crown. Appropriate scrutiny of the Crown Estate is therefore essential, which is what the amendment and new clauses I have tabled seek to ensure. Over the past decade, the Crown Estate generated £4.1 billion for the nation's finances, and it believes that the measures in the Bill will enable it to generate an additional £100 million in revenues to the Treasury by 2030, which is a prize worth seeking.

Before speaking to the measures in my name, I turn briefly to new clause 1, which proposes devolution of the Welsh functions of the Crown Estate to the Welsh Government. I wonder whether the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Llinos Medi) has support from businesses for this change, as splitting the Crown Estate at this time would introduce risk for assets and revenue streams. In Committee, we heard about the potential problems and complexity of licensing of the Celtic sea, to which the hon. Member for Mid and South Pembrokeshire (Henry Tufnell) just referred.

**Ben Lake:** I am very interested to hear the hon. Gentleman's arguments against devolving the administration of the Crown Estate to Wales. The previous Government—

his Government—devolved those same powers to Scotland. Can I ask him, very simply, why it works for Scotland, but is too complicated for Wales?

**James Wild:** We are dealing with the Bill in front of us today. To do so at the moment would be too complex for the licensing reasons and other reasons set out in Committee, which could undermine the returns that would be made for taxpayers, whether in Wales or other parts of the country.

The hon. Member for Mid and South Pembrokeshire spoke to amendment 5, a version of which was moved in Committee on his behalf. We recognise that the amendment has been revised. However, as I said in Committee, we are cautious about putting more obligations on the Crown Estate than clause 3 already does; there is danger of the overreach that he spoke about. I am sure he will be listening to the Minister's speech with some interest.

The kernel of the Bill is the expansion of the power of the Crown Estate to borrow, but there is a lack of parliamentary oversight on borrowing levels. Amendment 4, which appears in my name, would limit borrowing to a net debt-to-asset value ratio of no more than 25%, which could be amended by affirmative regulations. That would, I believe, be a proportionate check on this new borrowing power. When pushed in Committee, the Government again stated that limits on borrowing are best set outside legislation in a memorandum of understanding, but a memorandum of understanding is all too easily altered at the stroke of a pen—a point the Minister did not address in Committee. Will he give an undertaking, at the very least, that any changes to a memorandum of understanding would be reported to Parliament?

Given that Parliament is being asked to remove the restriction on borrowing and that the Government agree there should be a limit, I struggle to see why the cap should not be set in legislation, with the ability to amend it. Borrowing more than 25% carries risk, which could ultimately affect the sustainability of the estate. That is why the Government themselves have accepted that there should be a limit. As this new power affects assets held on behalf of the nation, it should be subject to control. This would be a perfectly reasonable check, and I hope Members will back it.

New clause 5 would require the Crown Estate to seek Treasury approval for disposals amounting to 10% or more of its total assets, and then to lay a report before Parliament. Disposal of assets has been an important part of the discussions throughout the proceedings on the Bill, both here and in the other place. Indeed, clause 5 was introduced after pressure to require Treasury consent before disposing of any of the Crown Estate's rights or privileges in relation to the territorial seabed. That is a welcome safeguard, but can the Minister conceive of any circumstances in which the Government would approve of such a sale? Can he give a commitment that national security would be at the fore in any consideration of such a proposal? Would Ministers come to the House before agreeing to any such disposal?

In Committee, the Minister stated that the current process dictates that the Government will be consulted on any potential sale of a nationally significant asset. How does he define nationally significant? He also argued that requiring Treasury consent for large disposals

[James Wild]

would undermine the flexibility that the Crown Estate needs to operate commercially, but the proposed new clause simply requires Treasury consent to be sought and then reported to Parliament. The Crown Estate will not suddenly decide tomorrow to dispose of an asset; it will go through its internal processes and business cases. A version of those papers could be provided to Ministers and, depending on the Ministers, there could be a very rapid approval process that does not compromise flexibility but ensures accountability. These assets are held for the benefit of the nation, and we should ensure some form of transparency and scrutiny.

New clause 6 would require the Chancellor to lay before Parliament any partnership agreement between the Crown Estate and GB Energy. That is fundamental, as without being able to see details of the agreement, we do not know what has been agreed. There is a lack of clarity over how this new partnership will work. We are still concerned that it has been created for political rather than economic reasons. The Opposition are sceptical about what the Government say about GB Energy, because during the election Labour claimed that GB Energy would cut energy bills by £300, but bills are going up. The chairman of GB Energy has refused to say when people can expect £300 off their energy bills. We know that GB Energy will spend £8.3 billion of taxpayers' money, but will not generate any energy, be an energy supplier or save families £300.

We are concerned that at all stages the Government have resisted greater transparency. When pushed on Second Reading and in Committee, the Exchequer Secretary said that while the partnership agreement itself will not be published since it will be commercially sensitive, the Crown Estate is committed to publishing information relating to the partnership as part of its existing annual report. However, the provisions to include that in an annual report could result in a considerable lag after such an agreement becomes operational and in only limited detail being published. Frankly, that is not good enough, which is why we have tabled new clause 6.

Transparency is important because we do not know how much the Crown Estate may invest in GB Energy's projects. We do not know what level of funds from this borrowing power could be used for that purpose. When I asked the Crown Estate how it would decide between projects that GB Energy favours and others that may have a higher rate of return, I was told that there would be a business plan for the partnership. That shows a further lack of transparency, as I assume the Minister will not place that before the House. I also asked about decision making for the partnership, and the response was:

"The intention is that both parties will seek agreement on investment decisions whilst retaining their own independence. The Crown Estate will not be compelled to agree to anything which it does not wish to agree to in fulfilment of its statutory duty."

I note the use of "intention" and "compelled".

There is a lingering concern that Ministers may pressure GB Energy and the Crown Estate to invest in the Energy Secretary's pet projects. Clearly, the chairman of GB Energy is very close to the Labour party, and nominating a Labour party donor as the chairman of

the Crown Estate adds to this concern. Publishing the agreement could help allay concerns about the Government's intentions.

If the Minister contends that the agreement, which does not yet exist, is too commercially sensitive, will he consider making a redacted version available? As I said in Committee, will he consider providing the agreement to the Public Accounts Committee on a confidential basis? As a former member of that Committee, I know of a precedent for that: in January 2018, the Cabinet Office provided a risk register of strategic suppliers to Government—a very sensitive document—to that Committee, which provided assurance on behalf of the House. I remain concerned about political pressure being put on the Crown Estate and urge Members to support our new clause 6, which would simply require the Chancellor to lay the partnership agreement before Parliament.

The Crown Estate Bill will deliver the modernisation of the Crown Estate. Our amendments and new clauses would ensure appropriate oversight and transparency as it delivers on its primary duty to maintain and enhance the value of the assets and the return for taxpayers.

**Matt Rodda** (Reading Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to contribute this evening. I will speak in favour of the Bill and address some of the amendments and new clauses, although there probably is not time to address them all. The Bill is an important and necessary step to help the Government take speedy action to tackle the climate emergency, and to help ensure energy security. It modernises the management of the Crown Estate, as we have heard, which potentially is a sleeping giant of green energy provision. The estate is responsible for vast amounts of coastal land and seabed, which have enormous potential to deliver wind power and other renewables.

Tackling the climate emergency is a significant challenge, but it is achievable. However, we need to step up to the challenge, and the Bill is part of a wider transformation of Government policy to do exactly that. As we heard in Committee, the Bill is urgently needed because although the Crown Estate has enormous potential, the rules governing its management are unduly restrictive. For example, the Crown Estate Act 1961, which governs the estate's management of its resources, sets out rules that would now be deemed inappropriate for holding very large cash balances. That makes it difficult for the Crown Estate to work with private investors to develop new wind energy and to transmit urgently needed new power to the grid. There is a clear need for these measures. I hope that, after sufficient debate, it is time for the Bill to make further progress.

I would like to support the Minister by briefly pointing out the inherent errors of some of the new clauses and amendments. New clause 5 seeks Treasury approval for the disposal of more than 10% of the Crown Estate's assets. Clearly, that would reduce flexibility for the Crown Estate in managing its estate and business. New clause 6 would require the Chancellor to lay any partnership agreement between the Crown Estate and GB Energy before Parliament. However, as we have heard, partnership agreements are normally commercially sensitive, and there could be a risk to further business if that was carried out.



Let me turn briefly to the amendments. Amendment 3, which in my opinion is misconstrued, would require the commissioners to assess the adequacy of protections against coastal erosion in areas affected by their offshore activities. However, the UK already has a whole series of dedicated statutory bodies in each of the devolved Administrations that are tasked with exactly that activity.

Equally, amendment 5 is unnecessary. It would ask the Crown Estate when reviewing the impact of its work to consider the impact on net zero targets, regional economic development and energy security. However, it is clear that the whole Bill is intended to tackle the challenge of addressing and eventually reaching net zero. Referencing specific targets risks further complicating what is already an important Bill that has had considerable discussion in Committee.

As my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary said at an earlier stage, this is an important Bill to help the UK achieve our climate targets, and it is a significant step forward in helping us retain energy security. It is time for the whole House to support it.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

7 pm

**Pippa Heylings** (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): I extend my thanks to colleagues in the other place, the Public Bill Office staff and those in this House who served on the Bill Committee. Their efforts have been invaluable in scrutinising and refining the Bill. I support the Bill. However, the Liberal Democrat amendments seek to ensure that it delivers for both people and the planet. While the Bill presents opportunities—it aims to enhance energy security, create new jobs and bring us closer to achieving our climate targets—we must not lose sight of the need for financial accountability, proportionate borrowing caps, the duty to protect nature in the marine environment and the necessity of taking communities with us and providing them with clear, tangible benefits.

It is important to note that our discussion coincides with the third anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its consequences not only for the Ukrainians suffering the war, but for families here in the UK with volatile, skyrocketing energy prices due to our reliance on fossil fuels from authoritarian regimes like Putin's: a stark reminder of the need to secure the production of our energy here in the UK. The last Conservative Government set the UK back both in meeting our climate targets and in seizing the opportunity to be global leaders in green energy due to indecision and broken pledges. We have the chance to be global leaders in offshore floating wind, which is why the Bill is so important.

I speak to amendment 2 to clause 3, which I hope we will vote on tonight. It would ensure that sustainable development was clearly defined in the Crown Estate's framework agreement, explicitly including a reference to a climate and nature duty. The Crown Estate plays a crucial role in managing our land, seas and natural resources. It is central to offshore wind expansion, biodiversity conservation and sustainable land use. Given its influence, merely requiring its commissioners to "keep under review" their impact on sustainable development is insufficient without a clear definition and accountability of what that entails, as the hon. Member for Mid and South Pembrokeshire (Henry Tufnell) mentioned. That is key to ensuring that there are social and economic

considerations in all investments and that the costs and benefits—in particular to local communities and local economies—are taken into consideration.

The amendment builds on Baroness Hayman's concession in the other House. She said:

"What matters is the impact we have and how much we have shifted the dial in terms of what the Crown Estate achieves in support of the Government's climate and nature objectives."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 5 November 2024; Vol. 840, c. 1448.]

By clearly defining sustainable development in the Crown Estate's framework agreement, the amendment would establish a benchmark for accountability in line with existing legislation. In contrast with the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Mid and South Pembrokeshire, this amendment mentions nature, too, and builds on the agreements in the other House. It seeks to enshrine the assurances given to the Lords, ensuring that the framework agreement would indeed include a climate and nature duty, aligning the Crown Estate's responsibilities with the UK's legally binding climate targets under the Climate Change Act 2008 and nature restoration goals under the Environment Act 2021. It is about more than environmental stewardship; it is about future-proofing the Crown Estate's decisions against the economic risks of climate change and nature loss.

I strongly support new clause 3, which would ensure that the Bill brought local communities along with it. That is essential. We tabled the new clause to guarantee that coastal and rural communities would see real benefits from Crown Estate activities. It would require a proper assessment of community benefits before investment decisions are made, and mandate that at least 5% of net profits be reinvested in affected areas.

Coastal communities need to see both jobs and a fair financial return from large-scale developments around them and off their shores. The Crown Estate generates billions from offshore wind, marine industries and land developments, yet local people often see little direct benefit. The new clause would redress that imbalance, ensuring that such communities impacted by change actively benefit from it. It is about fairness and economic regeneration. If the Government are serious about levelling up, they should back the new clause, which would ensure that the Crown Estate's success was shared by all, not just a privileged few.

We have other amendments, too—we were busy in Committee. New clause 2 focuses on marine spatial planning co-ordination and would ensure that the Crown Estate duly collaborated with the Marine Management Organisation, which has the mandate to make decisions about marine spatial planning, and that fishing communities were fully consulted. That aligns with work going on for years as Liberal Democrats have called for comprehensive land and sea use frameworks to resolve conflicts, determine priorities and improve co-ordination. With growing pressures from offshore wind, marine conservation, fishing and tourism, decision making must be joined up. Marine plans balance economic, environmental and social interests.

The Crown Estate must work closely with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' marine spatial prioritisation framework and the MMO's expertise, as well as other relevant consultees such as heritage. The Government amendment requiring ministerial approval for seabed sales is an important and positive step, recognising its national importance. However, that highlights the broader need for transparency and oversight

[Pippa Heylings]

in marine planning. The new clause seeks to avoid potential conflicts of interest in prioritising and decision making arising from the Crown Estate's new borrowing and investment powers.

Members may have noticed a theme running through the Liberal Democrats' amendments: that of ensuring that local communities both benefit from and have a real say in decisions that will affect them as a result of the Bill. That is why we have also tabled new clause 4. While the appointment of commissioners for Wales, England and Northern Ireland is a positive step, Wales still lacks the legal and financial control over the Crown Estate that Scotland enjoys. Welsh communities must also stand to benefit from the changes introduced by the Bill.

I hope that the Government and the Opposition will join the Liberal Democrats in supporting amendment 2 to ensure that sustainable development within the Crown Estate's framework agreement is clearly defined and includes a climate and nature duty. The Bill presents a trident of opportunity—it can enhance energy security, create jobs and bring us closer to achieving our net zero targets—but we cannot afford to lose sight of the need for financial accountability, the duty to protect nature, and the need to ensure that all communities are included in the crucial journey to net zero.

**Mrs Sureena Brackenridge** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): The Bill is not just about numbers on a spreadsheet. Ultimately, for my constituents, it is about jobs, opportunities and a better future for places like Wolverhampton North East. Right now, the Crown Estate is held back by outdated rules that limit its ability to invest. It is forced to sell assets just to raise capital. That is not sustainable, and it is stopping us from reaching our full potential.

The Bill changes the game, giving the Crown Estate the power to borrow, invest and back long-term projects that deliver real benefits for our communities. Wolverhampton North East is ready to seize those opportunities. With our forthcoming green innovation corridor, world-class manufacturing industry and skilled workforce known for its true graft, we are perfectly placed to drive the UK's green economy.

The Bill means more funding for renewable energy, more investment in advanced manufacturing and more demand for the products we make in Wolverhampton and Willenhall. More investment means more jobs, more apprenticeships and more chances for young people to get the skills they need to build a career in the industries of the future, whether in engineering, fabrication or high-tech manufacturing. The Bill will help us to build more, make more and sell more in Wolverhampton and Willenhall, right in the heart of the Black Country.

The unprecedented £60 billion partnership between Great British Energy and the Crown Estate will supercharge offshore wind development, creating huge opportunities for our local businesses. This is not just about turbines on land or at sea—we know that Wolverhampton and Willenhall are not geographically suitable for offshore wind—but about the supply chains, the manufacturing and the innovation that we can drive in towns and cities like Wolverhampton and Willenhall.

**James Naish** (Rushcliffe) (Lab): Just this morning, the CBI has said that Britain's net zero economy is booming. The sector is growing three times faster than the overall UK economy, the average salary in the net zero sector is £5,600 higher than the national average and productivity in the sector is nearly 40% higher than in the wider economy. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is an industrial opportunity for this country that we cannot afford to ignore, and that this Bill will help us to realise this opportunity and make it more achievable?

**Mrs Brackenridge**: I absolutely agree. This is an example of how this Government will respond to the changing world that we live in. This Bill is about backing British industry, investing in local communities and making sure that places such as Wolverhampton North East lead the way in the UK's future success.

**Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Does my hon. Friend agree that removing these outdated restrictions on the Crown Estate will allow a greater return for the public purse and benefit all our constituents across the country, including her own in Wolverhampton and mine in Harlow?

**Mrs Brackenridge**: I do agree with my hon. Friend, and based on the make-up of our constituencies, we come from a different angle from other Members who have raised important points in the debate. For us it is about jobs, apprenticeships and our local economy, so I back this Bill and I hope that the House will join me in doing so.

**Steff Aquarone** (North Norfolk) (LD): I want to speak to amendment 3, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Pippa Heylings), which deals specifically with coastal erosion. My constituency plays host to a whole load of energy infrastructure that is vital to our security and our renewable transition. We have the Bacton energy hub, which is on track to make the exciting transformation from being a key asset in national gas to hydrogen production and carbon capture. It is one of my constituency's largest employers, but it is also of national significance because of the role it plays in our energy ecosystem. It is therefore understandable that, a few years ago, a £20 million sandscaping scheme was welcomed. It gave protection not only to the energy terminal but to the villages of Bacton and Walcott that surround it. One local business owner spoke of how such a scheme means he no longer feels "trepidation" when he checks the weather forecast.

Just down the coast in the village of Happisburgh, the Norfolk Boreas and the Norfolk Vanguard wind farms make their landfall. Happisburgh has been at the frontline of the coastal erosion suffered in north Norfolk, with 40 homes already lost to the ever-encroaching North sea. This is a village battling the real-world impacts of climate change, and it is doing its bit to fight back by hosting renewable energy infrastructure, but it has had no additional protections. This double standard seems deeply unfair. It is in our interest to protect the renewable energy infrastructure we are building, but it is also in our interest to protect the communities that live alongside it.

People in Happisburgh have lived with the looming threat of coastal erosion and frequently feel left behind or forgotten about, and it seems as though this is just another example of this happening. I am sure that if

there were an erosion risk of this scale in central London or the south-east, the Government would move heaven and earth to take action, but in North Norfolk, right at the eastern edge of our island nation, people feel despondent about the situation they are facing. Our amendment seeks to right this wrong. We believe that when these reforms to the Crown Estate allow for new renewable energy products, efforts must be made to secure the coastline where they make landfall. Renewables are our future, and we have to make sure that the communities that host key infrastructure have a future too.

I am aware that the Minister did not support this amendment in Committee. I am not expecting the recess to have led him to a Damascene conversion, but I hope that he can provide some reassurance today on how the Government will look at this double standard for energy products and what steps they will be taking to provide protection to villages such as Happisburgh that are doing all the right things but feel they do not get their fair share back. I would also be happy to welcome him and any of his Government colleagues to Happisburgh to see the situation for themselves. I honestly believe that bearing witness to the way that our coastline is being ravaged by climate change, meeting the people it affects and understanding what we are set to lose will spark anyone into supporting radical action to stop this coming to pass. I would be delighted if the Government could back our amendment today, but if they are unable to do so, I hope that the Minister's team will be able to provide promises of progress for the residents of Happisburgh and all the other communities who live with the existential threat of coastal erosion.

**Jayne Kirkham** (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): I was on the Bill Committee and I have followed the Bill throughout, mainly because I represent Truro and Falmouth, which has huge potential to benefit from floating offshore wind, with Falmouth docks and our position in the Celtic sea. If the build-out in the Celtic sea is done quickly and done well, our young people will benefit from good, well-paid jobs in a strong local supply chain. I also want to mention the CBI report published today, which shows how the green economy has grown three times faster and has higher wages than the national average across the board. We in Falmouth could really do with some of that, so I welcome this Bill.

7.15 pm

The changes to the powers of the Crown Estate will enable it, in partnership with GB Energy, to invest in ports such as Falmouth without selling its assets, as well as mapping the seabed and front-loading the leasing rounds and local supply chains. As I said in an earlier debate, when a college in my constituency was struggling to get funding for a level 2 course on floating offshore wind engineering for local 14 to 16-year-olds, the Crown Estate stepped in with a year's funding to allow it to go ahead on a pilot scale. Now, with these changes, more positive interventions like this could be made, which would be really welcome in places such as Truro and Falmouth, where further education colleges are struggling to get the go-ahead for these kinds of courses.

New clause 2 deals with marine spatial planning. We need a spatial strategy for the ocean that links energy, fishing and nature restoration, and that has to be done in consultation with all the industries and with environmentalists, but this Bill is not the place to do that.

New clause 3 deals with community benefits. Communities will benefit so much from the economic boost that this Bill will enable, with training and education, good jobs, supply chains and investment in our ports.

Amendments 2 and 5 cover issues that we discussed in the Bill Committee. I would simply ask the Minister to give an assurance that the public framework will have regard to environmental, regional and economic growth, and social value benefits, and to confirm that this reform will enable the Crown Estate to invest in a wider range of high-impact projects across the UK, strengthening floating offshore wind, nature recovery and benefits to those regional economies.

The partnership between the Crown Estate and GB Energy has real potential to be a huge force for good—we really feel that down in Cornwall. It will spearhead the development of offshore renewable energy in a speedy but sustainable way, investing in energy production initially and laying the groundwork for our energy security of the future, as well as building our local communities, our infrastructure and our supply chains in some of the most left-behind and deprived parts of the UK.

**David Chadwick** (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): I rise to speak in support of new clause 4 and to express my party's frustration with the Government's refusal thus far to devolve the Crown Estate to Wales. It is the firm view of the Liberal Democrats, both here in Westminster and in the Senedd, that this decision is wrong for Wales and its economy. Under the current system, the profits generated from Wales's vast natural resources flow directly to the UK Treasury, offering no benefit to the communities where that wealth is created.

The Crown Estate in Wales is set to generate millions annually from offshore wind energy leases in Welsh waters. If this money were kept within Wales, it could contribute an estimated additional £50 million to the Welsh Government's budget at a time when public services in Wales are crumbling. It is nothing short of outrageous that the Labour Government in Westminster seek to deny Wales these vital sources of income, which could help to address the crisis in our public services, economy and infrastructure. The Labour Government's refusal to devolve these powers further entrenches the outrageous notion by Labour and the Conservatives that Wales is a lesser nation than Scotland.

While Scotland has controlled its Crown Estate since 2017, Wales, despite having vast Crown Estate assets within its borders, has been left without those powers. The benefits of devolution for Scotland have been clear, with the Scottish Crown Estate generating over £103 million for the public finances since 2017. The excuses we have heard from the UK Government for failing to put Wales on an equal footing simply do not hold up. Patronising comments from Ministers about how devolving the Crown Estate would not be in Wales's "best interests" or would be a "waste of time" are frankly an insult to the people of Wales.

This Government claim to support growth, but they seem determined to keep Wales from reaching its full potential. Instead of empowering Welsh communities to harness the benefits of their own resources, profits continue to flow directly to London. That is not the vision of growth to benefit local communities or level up left-behind communities; it is a continuation of the



[David Chadwick]

Conservatives' failed economic model, which prioritises centralisation and investment in the south-east of England over everywhere else. It would be a great mistake if those in power in Westminster were to deny Wales the opportunity to build a better future for our communities. I hope the Government will change their mind.

**Jim Allister** (North Antrim) (TUV): I wish to primarily address new clause 7, tabled by the hon. Members for Belfast South and Mid Down (Claire Hanna) and for Ynys Môn (Llinos Medi), and to express opposition to it. It very much reflects what is in new clause 1, in terms of seeking devolution of the Crown Estate, but in this case to the Northern Ireland Executive in respect of the assets there. I oppose that for a number of reasons. It presently is a reserved matter, and I strongly believe that is how it should stay. I say that not because that is right ideologically, but because practically it is beyond belief that the current Stormont Executive could ever handle the controversies that come with the Crown Estate.

This is an Executive in Stormont that have been in existence for almost 13 months and still cannot agree a programme for Government. If we were to hand them something as controversial as control of the Crown Estate, we all know what the outcome would be. Why is it controversial? For one specific and historical reason. Lough Foyle is controlled and owned by the Crown Estate. It is a piece of water that separates County Londonderry, which is in Northern Ireland, from County Donegal, which is in the Republic of Ireland, but the entirety of Lough Foyle since last we had a King Charles rests under British control. In 1662, Charles II gifted Lough Foyle, the surrounding waters, the seabed and the waters within it to the Irish Society. The Irish Society was a conglomerate of various companies from the City of London, which did a great deal to develop and build the city of Londonderry; and as part of that, I presume, it was gifted control over Lough Foyle. In 1952, the Irish Society conveyed Lough Foyle to the Crown Estate.

A divided Executive in Northern Ireland would be hopelessly incapable of resolving the issues that flow from the somewhat controversial aspect of the entirety of Lough Foyle, right up to the coastline of County Donegal, being properly, legally and in perpetuity in the control of the Crown Estate. Therefore, devolving the Crown Estate to the Northern Ireland Executive would be disastrous for the good management of the lough and for the uncontroversial continuance of its ability to be developed. That might be a particular situation, but it is in addition to my opposition from an ideological point of view and my belief that the Crown Estate is a national asset that should continue to be of a reserved category. I think the proposition in new clause 7 would be the utmost folly; I trust that the Government will resist it and that the House will reject it.

**Jim Shannon:** It is a pleasure to contribute to the debate; I will follow on from what the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) seeks. I want to make a specific request, which I did when I intervened on the hon. Member for Mid and South Pembrokeshire (Henry Tufnell).

My issues with the provisions primarily relate to the fishing sector and the impact on fishing fleets around the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but particularly in Strangford for Portavogie, and Ardglass and Kilkeel in South Down. I appreciate the opportunity to speak on an issue that affects Crown Estates in the entirety of the United Kingdom.

As the Library briefing outlines, the Crown Estate focuses on activities that align with wider national needs, including energy security and sustainable economic growth. It manages the seabed and much of the coastline across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, playing a "fundamental role in the sustainable development of this national asset, including the UK's world-leading offshore wind sector."

I am not against wind turbines and the green energy they produce, but I am concerned about the impact on the fishing sector. I want to state my concerns and express my support for the fishing fleets at Portavogie, Ardglass and Kilkeel, where fishing is an important economic sector, providing jobs and investment. That has been happening for hundreds of years, and I want to see that tradition maintained. I hope that when the Minister sums up, he will reassure fishing communities that any development will not be to the detriment of the fishing sector.

**Jim Allister:** Does the hon. Member agree that one of the problems in this territory is that we do not yet have the definition of what is meant to be sustainable? On reading the Bill, it appears that the whole focus of what sustainable will be is on the green energy side, rather than what will sustain the fishing industry.

**Jim Shannon:** That is the thrust of where I am coming from. I am not against the idea of green energy, but I want to ensure the sustainability of the fishing sector over the years. It has been sustainable and still provides jobs in Kilkeel and Ardglass, and I want it to continue to do so. That would be my concern as well.

The fishermen in my area are well aware of the limitations brought about by Crown holdings on the coastline, and concerns have been expressed to me regarding the partnership announced by the Government for the Crown Estate and Great British Energy—the very issue that the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim refers to—to bring forward new offshore wind developments. I wholeheartedly welcome renewable energy and attempts to harness the reliable energy of our vast seas and loughs, but only inasmuch as they do not stop the fishing sector from operating and being successful. That must always be the key consideration. If we were to lose one of our primary sectors in fishing and to gain wind turbines and green energy, that would be something that the Government would have to consider sensibly.

Similarly, the regeneration and development department in my local Ards and North Down council has highlighted the additional red tape that comes from leasing or altering existing leases to the Crown Estate. That being said, the council is also thankful for the open doors and accessibility when needed. However, it has been seen that there is a willingness to consider the national needs when requests are made for alterations, and that is appreciated. When we look at the national needs, we want to ensure that they do not take away from the local needs of those in Strangford, in Ards and North Down and in the fishing fleets and those who own land and farms around the Irish sea and Strangford lough.

During 2023-24, the Crown Estate generated a net revenue profit of £1.1 billion. Over the past decade, it has returned £4.1 billion of net revenue profit to the Treasury. We must ensure that the Crown Estate is being run at ultimate capacity and is bringing money into our coffers, but also that it has a socially conscious operating model and that it is being used to do good for everyone, including the fishing sector in my constituency.

I was very much inspired, as we probably all were, by the Prince of Wales's scheme on homelessness, and by the fact that he is using his personal estate, the Duchy of Cornwall, to build 24 homes to help tackle homelessness. The construction of the first homes in Nansledan, Newquay, is due to be complete in autumn 2025. That good work should inspire us all to ensure that a Crown Estate operated by a team appointed by the Prime Minister attempts where it can to make such an impact for the common good.

7.30 pm

My understanding is that the Bill would broaden the scope of activity that the Crown Estate can undertake to support the delivery of its core purpose to include activities across net zero, nature recovery, economic growth—that covers the fishing sector—and more, so that it can generate returns for the public purse. The Bill will also enable the Crown Estate to invest in capital-intensive projects more effectively. If that is the case, I will support the Bill, as long as we remember our obligations to existing businesses and partnerships, including in the fishing and industrial sectors. I welcome the appointment of a commissioner who will have an eye over Northern Ireland. Will the Minister reassure me, the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim and other affected Northern Ireland Members that elected representatives can have direct contact and discussion with the commissioner on any fishing sector issues that come to our attention?

I welcome the progress of the Crown Estate, and recognise the benefit that will come from improvement, but none of that can be done on the back of existing relationships. The Minister is an honourable man—we know that. He has set out to help us and reassure us on many things—although, for the record, there has not been too much reassurance lately. I seek assurances for the fishing sector in Strangford, and in South Down. Given that the Member of Parliament for that constituency does not even attend Parliament, I find myself with the duty to work on behalf of the fishing fleets in Ardglass and Kilclief. The fishing fleets are all in the boat together—to use a pun—and all need help. If the Minister can reassure us, he may go some way towards reassuring the fishing sector, which is not quite sure yet about what is happening.

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

**The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray):** I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate, and provided further detail about their amendments or concerns.

I start by making it clear that the Government have carefully considered all amendments throughout the passage of the Bill. Where we have agreed with the intent behind an amendment, we have worked hard to

find an appropriate way forward. That was evidenced in the changes made by this House to ensure appropriate protections for our seabed. As a result of changes made to the Bill, the Crown Estate will now be required to seek the approval of the Treasury for any permanent disposal of the seabed. I thank the Opposition for a constructive debate on that matter. Alongside that, further changes made in the other place have helped to strengthen the Bill, including changes to require the appointment of commissioners with special responsibility for giving advice about England, Wales and Northern Ireland; a reporting requirement in respect of activities with Great British Energy; and a requirement relating to sustainable development. In that spirit, I have considered the amendments that are before us.

I thank the hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Llinos Medi) for tabling new clause 1, under which, within two years of the day on which the Act commences, the Treasury must have completed the transfer of responsibility for management of the Crown Estate in Wales to the Welsh Government. It would allow the Treasury, by regulations, to make provision about the transfer relating to reserved matters as necessary, and would require it to ensure that no person in Crown employment has their employment adversely affected by the transfer of responsibility.

I also thank the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Pippa Heylings) for tabling new clause 4, to which her colleague, the hon. Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick), also spoke. It would require the Treasury to set out a scheme for transferring all Welsh functions of the Crown Estate commissioners to Welsh Ministers or a person nominated by Welsh Ministers. The Welsh functions would consist of the property, rights or interests in land in Wales, and rights in relation to the Welsh zone. As I set out in Committee, the Government believe that there is greater benefit for the people of Wales and the wider United Kingdom in retaining the Crown Estate's current form.

New clause 4 would most likely require the creation of a new entity to take on the management of the Crown Estate in Wales—an entity that, by definition, would not benefit from the Crown Estate's current substantial capability, capital and systems abilities. It would further fragment the UK energy market by adding an additional entity and, as a consequence, it would risk damaging international investor confidence in UK renewables. It would also risk disrupting the National Energy System Operator's grid connectivity reform, which is taking a whole-system approach to the planning of generation and network infrastructure. Those reforms aim to create a more efficient system and reduce the time it takes for generation projects to connect to the grid.

**Ben Lake:** I am grateful to the Minister for outlining his concerns about devolving the Crown Estate to the Welsh Government—he listed a number of them. Am I right in saying that he believes that the devolution of powers from the Crown Estate to Scotland has fragmented the market, and is in some way to the disbenefit of people in Scotland?

**James Murray:** The matter that we are considering today, through the two new clauses that I have mentioned, is the proposal by Opposition parties for devolution to Wales. We are not analysing what may have happened in Scotland, historically; we are looking at the proposals put to us in those new clauses, which I am addressing.

[James Murray]

To be clear, the cumulative impact of the changes that the hon. Member for Ynys Môn is suggesting in her new clause would likely be to significantly delay the pathway to net zero.

**Liz Saville Roberts:** The Minister said that the Bill would be beneficial to the people of Wales as it stands. Could he quantify that benefit, please?

**James Murray:** If the right hon. Member waits just a moment, I will come to some of the direct benefits for the people of Wales of retaining the Crown Estate in its current form.

It is important to emphasise that the Crown Estate's marine investments are made on a portfolio-wide basis across England and Wales. Devolving to Wales would disrupt existing investments, as they would need to be restructured to accommodate a Welsh-specific entity. To devolve the Crown Estate at this time would risk jeopardising the pipeline of offshore wind development in the Celtic sea, which is planned for into the 2030s. The Crown Estate's offshore wind leasing round 5 is spread across the English and Welsh administrative boundaries in the Celtic sea. It was launched in February last year and is expected to contribute 4.5 GW of total energy capacity—enough to power 4 million homes.

In addition to energy, the extensive jobs and supply chain requirements of round 5 will also likely deliver significant benefits for Wales and the wider United Kingdom. Lumen, an advisory firm to the Crown Estate, has estimated that manufacturing, transporting and assembling the wind farms could potentially create around 5,300 jobs and a £1.4 billion boost for the UK economy. Devolution would also delay UK-wide grid connectivity reform. The Crown Estate is using its data and expertise as manager of the seabed to feed into the National Energy System Operator's new strategic spatial energy plan. On Wales, the Crown Estate is working in partnership with the energy system operator to ensure that its pipeline of Welsh projects—the biggest of which is the round 5 offshore wind opportunity in the Celtic sea—can benefit from this co-ordinated approach to grid connectivity up front.

**David Chadwick:** If devolution presents such enormous barriers, why are the Government choosing to put the headquarters of Great British Energy in Scotland?

**James Murray:** GB Energy is for the benefit of the whole of the UK. It is absolutely right to locate its headquarters in Aberdeen, given the strong connection between Aberdeen and use of the assets of the North sea to generate power for the entire United Kingdom. In fact, the hon. Gentleman's example underlines my point, which is that when different parts of the United Kingdom work together, we can achieve more than we can separately. I thank him for endorsing my point.

It would not make commercial sense to introduce a new entity, with control of assets only within Wales, into a complex operating environment in which partnerships have already been formed. Furthermore, the Crown Estate's assets and interests in Wales are fundamentally smaller than its assets in England, and would likely not be commercially viable if their costs were unsupported

by the wider Crown Estate portfolio. The Crown Estate can take a longer-term approach to its investments and spread the cost of investments across its entire portfolio. A self-contained, single entity in Wales would not have the same ability; neither would it benefit from the expertise that the Crown Estate has developed over decades of delivering offshore wind at scale. A devolved entity would be starting from scratch.

**Liz Saville Roberts:** The Minister has just told the House that Wales is too small and poor to benefit from the devolution of the Crown Estate. That is an extraordinary argument, and I am sure that the Welsh Government will share my amazement. Has he discussed that with his partners in Welsh Labour?

**James Murray:** I think the right hon. Member has misunderstood the point I was making. If we were to have a devolved entity, it would be starting from scratch midway through a multimillion-pound commercial tendering process, just at a time when the Crown Estate is undertaking critical investment in the UK's path towards net zero—something I am sure she is keen to support.

The commercial viability of all three 1.5 GW floating offshore wind project development areas in the Celtic sea, which straddle the English and Welsh administrative boundaries, benefited from the Crown Estate's significant investment of time, expertise and capital, which enabled their entry into the market. UK floating offshore wind, an emerging offshore technology that the Crown Estate is supporting, would be particularly vulnerable to market disruption.

It is important to underline that income generated by the whole Crown Estate benefits the people of Wales. As I have noted, the Crown Estate pays its entire net profits into the UK Consolidated Fund each year. That means that much of the revenue already supports public services in Wales, either by supporting UK Government spending in reserved areas or through the funding provided under the Barnett formula and the Welsh Government's block grant funding.

**Llinos Medi:** As I mentioned in Committee, the Barnett formula is not a fair formula for Wales. In the Scottish model, £10 million was taken out of the block grant, but those communities received £103 million back. I think that is a fair exchange. Does the Minister not agree?

**James Murray:** The hon. Member has highlighted that the changes made in Scotland led to a reduction in the block grant to Scotland.

The focus of the new clauses is the proposal to devolve Crown Estate capabilities to Wales. As I am setting out, that would not make commercial sense when it comes to advancing greater energy capacity, or when it comes to increasing the Crown Estate's net profit, which is of course reinvested in public services right across Wales and other parts of the UK.

I draw Members' attention to the fact that in the other place, the Government supported the inclusion of clause 6, which requires the appointment of commissioners responsible for giving advice about England, Wales and Northern Ireland. That will ensure that the Crown Estate's board of commissioners continues to work in the best interests of Wales.



**Jim Shannon:** I seek assurance that the ambitious net zero targets will not detrimentally affect the fishing sector. I remember some years ago there was talk of a wind farm just off the coast of Kilkeel, and the fishermen were concerned that it would be in one of their prime fishing sectors, where scallops were plentiful. If that continued, the fishing sector could lose out because the Government decided to push for net zero. I sought reassurance that Northern Ireland MPs would be able to contact the Northern Ireland commissioner directly, but I ask specifically for a wider assurance about the fishing sector in Northern Ireland—for Portavogie, Ardglass and Kilkeel.

**James Murray:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention about the impact on the fishing sector, and I can reassure him that the Crown Estate is committed to the sustainable management of the seabed. As with any developer, the Crown Estate's proposals go through the standard planning approval process, which includes the relevant environmental assessments. Under the Crown Estate's strategy, it has an objective to take a leading role in stewarding the natural environment and biodiversity. Key to delivering on that aim is managing the seabed in a way that reduces pressure on, and accelerates recovery of, our marine environment. Of course, the Bill will not impact directly on how much commercial fishing takes place in areas managed by the Crown Estate.

I pointed out that the inclusion of clause 6 in the Bill in the other place provided for the appointment of commissioners responsible for giving advice about England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The requirement to give advice to the board about Wales will be alongside the commissioners' existing duties. That change will strengthen the Crown Estate's ability to deliver benefits for the whole UK.

Hon. Members may not agree with the points I have made, but I hope that I have set out clearly why the Government believe that the existing structure remains the best approach, and I hope that hon. Members will feel that they do not need to press their new clauses to a vote.

New clause 2, which was tabled by the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire, would require the Crown Estate to ensure that any decisions about marine spatial priorities are co-ordinated with the priorities of the Marine Management Organisation, and to consult any communities or industries impacted by the plans, including fishing communities. I confirm that the Crown Estate and the Marine Management Organisation already have well established ways of working together to ensure effective collaboration for marine spatial planning and prioritisation.

7.45 pm

The Crown Estate's collaboration with the Marine Management Organisation and other relevant statutory bodies is governed by the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009. The Act establishes the framework for marine planning and licensing in the UK, and it requires the Crown Estate to have regard to marine policy documents, such as marine plans, in its decision making. The work of the Crown Estate is also governed by the habitat regulations, which require it to conduct plan-level habitat regulation assessments for leasing or licensing activities.

Furthermore, in 2020 the Crown Estate and the Marine Management Organisation jointly agreed a statement of intent, which is reviewed periodically to provide a focus on priorities and opportunities for alignment. That statement of intent complements a memorandum of understanding agreed in February 2011, which sets out a framework to encourage co-operation between parties in relation to the sustainable development of the seabed and rights managed by the Crown Estate.

**Pippa Heylings:** We will not be pressing this new clause to a vote, but the new investment and borrowing powers change the context for the 2020 memorandum of understanding. I ask for reassurance that we might seek a new memorandum of understanding between the Marine Management Organisation and the Crown Estate.

**James Murray:** I thank the hon. Member for her intervention. As I said, the Crown Estate and the Marine Management Organisation agreed the statement of intent in 2020, and it is reviewed periodically to focus on priorities and opportunities for alignment. That may provide an opportunity for review in due course to ensure that it meets current aims.

In addition to the Crown Estate's relationship with the Marine Management Organisation, there are various regulatory requirements on developers who lease areas of the seabed from the Crown Estate to engage with the Marine Management Organisation themselves. Those include requirements through marine licensing. Developers must obtain marine licences from the Marine Management Organisation for activities that could impact on the marine environment. That process involves consultation with statutory bodies and adherence to marine plan policies.

As part of a marine licence application, developers must conduct environmental impact assessments for projects that could significantly alter the environment. That includes consultation with the Marine Management Organisation and other relevant authorities. Developers are furthermore encouraged to engage with local communities, statutory bodies and other stakeholders throughout the planning and development process to address concerns and ensure compliance with marine plans. I welcome the indication from the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire that she feels able to withdraw the new clause, and I hope I have gone some way to addressing the points that she made.

New clause 3, which was also tabled by the hon. Member, would require the commissioners to assess plans for benefits to local communities and coastal communities in respect of offshore activities before making any investment decisions. It would also require the commissioners to transfer at least 5% of the Crown Estate's net profit to local communities impacted by its activities. As I set out in Committee, local communities benefit economically from onshore and offshore developments—for example, through job creation and increased business for local suppliers. Local communities will also benefit in the long term as the country transitions away from volatile fossil fuel markets towards clean, domestically produced power, enhancing Britain's energy independence and security.

As I highlighted in Committee, the Crown Estate has specifically designed the leasing process for its offshore wind leasing round 5 in the Celtic sea to require developers

[James Murray]

to make commitments to deliver social and environmental value. Tender bidders must think about how their developments can encourage healthier, more resilient and more prosperous communities, creating lasting benefits that extend beyond the lifetime of wind farm leases. Those commitments will be monitored, reported on and enforced throughout the lifetime of the relevant round 5 developments.

As I have laid out before, the Crown Estate is committed to proactively working with local communities and partners to enable employment and skills opportunities. As I mentioned in Committee, it has invested £50 million through the supply chain accelerator to stimulate green jobs and develop a green skills pipeline. It is supporting development in the skills we need for the future, through measures that range from a GCSE in engineering skills for offshore wind, seed-funded by the Crown Estate and developed with Cornwall college, to a post-16 destination renewables course with Pembrokeshire college. It is also partnering with the employment charity Workwhile to create green construction apprenticeships.

The Crown Estate already works closely with communities, charities, businesses and the Government to ensure that its skills initiatives are sensitive to market demands and emerging technologies. While I respect the concerns reflected in new clause 3, the Government consider it important that the Crown Estate retains flexibility in how its skills initiatives are funded and delivered. That enables it to contribute to skills training in the best possible way, while—importantly—not conflicting with its statutory duty to maintain and enhance the value of the estate. On that basis, I hope that the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire feels able to withdraw the new clause.

New clause 5 seeks to limit the ability of the Crown Estate to dispose of assets without Treasury approval, by requiring it to seek consent for disposals of assets totalling 10% or more of its total assets in a single year. It would also require the Chancellor to lay a report before Parliament within 28 days of being notified of disposals above that threshold. As the Government have set out both in Committee and in the other place, in our view imposing a limit on disposals would undermine the flexibility needed to enable the Crown Estate to operate commercially and meet its core duties under the Act. It is important to emphasise that the Bill is not intended materially to alter the independence of the Crown Estate. Requiring the Treasury to approve the Crown Estate's ordinary business transactions, which may well be caught by the new clause, would encroach on the independence of the Crown Estate. That is inconsistent with the Government's vision for the Crown Estate.

The hon. Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild) has concerns that the Crown Estate could choose to sell off critical or significant assets—indeed, he raised that point in Committee. I reassure the House that strong safeguards are already in place to ensure that the Crown Estate maintains and enhances the estate. The first is a legislative safeguard, namely the statutory duty on the Crown Estate to maintain and enhance the value of the estate, and the returns obtained from it, while having due regard to the requirements of good management. Those are set out in the Crown Estate Act 1961 and will

remain unchanged by the Bill. The second is a requirement set out in the framework document that governs the relationship between the Treasury and the Crown Estate. That document is clear that the Crown Estate should inform the Treasury of any matters concerning spending, income or finance that are novel, contentious or repercussive. The Government's view is that that captures any proposed sales of nationally significant assets—a point the shadow Minister raised. I recognise that he may not agree, but I hope he understands the Government's position on the matter and, as a result, feels able to withdraw his new clause.

The shadow Minister also tabled new clause 6, which would require the Chancellor to lay before Parliament any partnership agreement between the Crown Estate and Great British Energy. As I made clear in Committee, partnership agreements are highly commercially sensitive. It is therefore right that any agreement is not made public or laid before Parliament, as to do so would likely prejudice the commercial interests of the Crown Estate or Great British Energy. I hope the hon. Member feels that he does not need to push the new clause to a vote.

I will consider amendments 1 and 4 together to try to make progress as speedily as I can, Madam Deputy Speaker. They would impose a legislative limit on the amount of borrowing that could be undertaken by the Crown Estate, and both would require the Government to introduce affirmative regulations, setting out a borrowing limit of no more than a 25% net debt-to-asset value ratio. I thank hon. Members for their contributions on this matter. The Government recognise that borrowing controls are an important consideration for the Bill. As such, the Government made available the Crown Estate's business case, as well as the underpinning memorandum of understanding, which sets out the guardrails that will protect against uncontrolled or excessive borrowing. The key principle is whether a specific limit should be set in legislation. As I have set out previously, it remains the Government's view that limits on borrowing are best set outside of legislation in a memorandum of understanding.

I have listened to the point made by the hon. Member for North West Norfolk that a limit outside legislation can be easily changed, but I reassure the House that the Bill has been carefully drafted to include strong controls, specifically the requirement for Treasury consent. Alongside that, the existing requirement for the Crown Estate to maintain and enhance the value of the estate, while having due regard for the requirements of good management, is maintained. Taken together, those elements provide clear guardrails around the ability of the Crown Estate to borrow.

Amendment 2, tabled by the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire, would require any framework document published by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Crown Estate or the commissioners to define “sustainable development”. That definition would be required to include a reference to a “climate and nature duty”, which would mean

“a duty to achieve any targets set out under Part 1 of the Climate Change Act 2008 or under sections 1 to 3 of the Environment Act 2021.”

As I set out in Committee, the Government understand the intention behind amendment 2, but a key purpose of the 1961 Act was to repeal various detailed statutory

provisions that had built up over the previous 150 years, which were hampering the effective management of the estate. By focusing the commissioners' duties on enhancing the estate's value and the returns generated, the commissioners have a clear objective on which they can be held to account. It is an important principle that giving an organisation too many objectives will make it far less effective than giving it clear and focused priorities, and, as I set out in Committee, the Crown Estate is a commercial business, independent from Government, that operates for profit. That mandate is unchanged by the Bill—[*Interruption.*]

I am getting vibes from the Whip, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I might not respond as fully as I had hoped to some of the remaining amendments. However, I will address amendment 5, which I know matters to several Labour Members who have spoken to it. Amendment 5, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid and South Pembrokeshire (Henry Tufnell), would require the commissioners, when keeping the impact of their activities under review with respect to clause 3, to have regard to the UK's net zero targets, regional economic growth and resilience of energy security. I thank my hon. Friend for the discussions that he and I had on this topic both before Committee and last week. A version of the amendment was debated in Committee. I particularly thank my hon. Friends the Members for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham), for St Austell and Newquay (Noah Law) and for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) for engaging with me on this matter, and setting out so clearly what is important to them in the constituencies they represent.

Although I understand the sentiment behind my hon. Friend's amendment, it is perhaps helpful to set out the context behind clause 3. The clause was supported by the Government in the other place, as it sought to clarify and enhance the accountability of the Crown Estate to deliver on environmental, social and economic outcomes. Clause 3 will require the commissioners to keep under review the impact of their activities on the achievement of sustainable development in the United Kingdom. I emphasise that the public framework document, which governs the relationship between the Crown Estate and the Treasury, will be updated in light of that clause, and will include a definition of "sustainable development", as I have set out several times. The Crown Estate will continue to include information on its activities in its annual report, which is laid before Parliament. The Government's intention throughout the passage of the Bill has been to ensure that it can stand the test of time without need for regular updates. That, in part, is why the term "sustainable development" was adopted.

I hope I have addressed some of the concerns raised by hon. Members, although I regret I was not able to address all the amendments with quite the level of detail I had hoped. As I made clear earlier, the Government have carefully considered all amendments throughout the passage of the Bill, and I hope that hon. Members will understand the approach we are taking. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Reading Central (Matt Rodda), for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge), for Harlow (Chris Vince), and for Rushcliffe (James Naish) for powerfully setting out the benefits that the Crown Estate and measures in the Bill will provide to people in their constituencies and across the country. I hope all hon. Members will understand

the approach we are taking, and support our targeted and measured changes to ensure that the Crown Estate is able to operate independently, commercially and in the national interest.

**Llinos Medi:** Diolch, Madam Dirprwy Lefarydd. The Government have tried to explain how devolution and the creation of a Welsh Crown Estate would undermine investor confidence, but that has not been the case for the devolved Scottish Crown Estate, which has raised £700 million from offshore wind investments since 2022. A devolved Crown Estate could lead to greater alignment and integration with the economy in Wales, as has been the case in Scotland. With a well-managed transition, there is no evidence that disruption would occur. Devolution would also offer opportunities to strengthen the role of the local supply chains to be used and to actually see the 5,300 jobs that the Government claim will be created for the people of Wales.

I remind hon. Members that it is projected that child poverty numbers will reach 34.4% in Wales in five years' time, at the end of this decade, but the Joseph Rowntree Foundation says that the forecast in Scotland is 19.8%. I refer hon. Members to the words of a former Secretary of State for Wales, Lord Peter Hain. He recently said that opposing devolution of the Crown Estate

"reflects old, centralised, conservative, anti-devolution Whitehall thinking."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 14 October 2024; Vol. 840, c. 18.]

Labour promised us that a Labour Government in Wales and a Labour Government in Westminster would benefit the people of Wales. This Labour Government do not show any ambition for the people of Wales, and I ask every Member who wants to see the best for Wales to join me in the Aye Lobby.

*Question put*, That the clause be read a Second time.

*The House divided:* Ayes 59, Noes 316.

**Division No. 101]**

**[8 pm**

# **AYES**

Amos, Gideon	Heylings, Pippa
Aquarone, Steff	Jarvis, Liz
Babarinde, Josh	Jones, Clive
Bennett, Alison	Kohler, Mr Paul
Brewer, Alex	Lake, Ben
Brown-Fuller, Jess	MacCleary, James
Cane, Charlotte	MacDonald, Mr Angus
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Maguire, Ben
Chadwick, David	Maguire, Helen
Chamberlain, Wendy	Martin, Mike
Chambers, Dr Danny	Maynard, Charlie
Chowns, Ellie	Medi, Llinos
Collins, Victoria	Miller, Calum
Cooper, Daisy	Mohamed, Iqbal
Dance, Adam	Morgan, Helen
Davies, Ann	Morrison, Mr Tom ( <i>Proxy vote</i>
Denyer, Carla	<i>cast by Dr Chambers</i> )
Farron, Tim	Munt, Tessa
Franklin, Zöe	Murray, Susan
George, Andrew	Perteghella, Manuela
Gibson, Sarah ( <i>Proxy vote</i>	Pinkerton, Dr Al
<i>cast by Anna Sabine</i> )	Ramsay, Adrian
Glover, Olly	Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Goldman, Marie	Roome, Ian
Gordon, Tom	Sabine, Anna
Green, Sarah	Savage, Dr Roz
Harding, Monica	Saville Roberts, rh Liz



Slade, Vikki  
Smart, Lisa  
Sollom, Ian  
Taylor, Luke  
Voaden, Caroline  
Wilkinson, Max

Wilson, Munira  
Young, Claire

### Tellers for the Ayes:

**Bobby Dean and  
Siân Berry**

### NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy  
vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-  
Addy*)

Abbott, Jack  
Abrahams, Debbie  
Ahmed, Dr Zubir  
Alaba, Mr Bayo  
Aldridge, Dan  
Alexander, rh Heidi  
Al-Hassan, Sadik  
Ali, Rushanara  
Allister, Jim  
Anderson, Callum  
Anderson, Fleur  
Anderson, Lee  
Asser, James  
Athwal, Jas  
Atkinson, Catherine  
Atkinson, Lewis  
Bailey, Mr Calvin  
Baines, David  
Baker, Alex  
Baker, Richard  
Bance, Antonia  
Barker, Paula  
Barron, Lee  
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex  
Beales, Danny  
Beavers, Lorraine  
Begum, Apsana (*Proxy vote  
cast by Sarah Sultana*)  
Bell, Torsten  
Benn, rh Hilary  
Billington, Ms Polly  
Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast  
by Chris Elmore*)  
Blake, Rachel  
Bloore, Chris  
Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote  
cast by Chris Elmore*)  
Bonavia, Kevin  
Botterill, Jade  
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena  
Brash, Mr Jonathan  
Bryant, Chris  
Buckley, Julia  
Burgon, Richard  
Burke, Maureen  
Byrne, Ian  
Cadbury, Ruth  
Caliskan, Nesil  
Campbell, rh Sir Alan  
Campbell, Mr Gregory  
Campbell, Irene  
Campbell, Juliet  
Campbell-Savours, Markus  
Carns, Al  
Champion, Sarah  
Charalambous, Bambos  
Coleman, Ben  
Collinge, Lizzi  
Collins, Tom  
Conlon, Liam

Coombes, Sarah  
Cooper, Andrew  
Cooper, Dr Beccy  
Costigan, Deirdre  
Cox, Pam  
Coyle, Neil  
Craft, Jen  
Creasy, Ms Stella  
Crichton, Torcuil  
Curtis, Chris  
Daby, Janet  
Dakin, Sir Nicholas  
Dalton, Ashley  
Darlington, Emily  
Davies, Jonathan  
Davies, Paul  
Davies, Shaun  
Dean, Josh  
Dickson, Jim  
Dixon, Samantha  
Dodds, rh Anneliese  
Dollimore, Helena  
Doughty, Stephen  
Dowd, Peter  
Duncan-Jordan, Neil  
Eagle, Dame Angela  
Eagle, rh Maria  
Edwards, Lauren  
Edwards, Sarah  
Efford, Clive  
Ellis, Maya  
Elmore, Chris  
Entwistle, Kirith  
Eshalomi, Florence  
Evans, Chris  
Falconer, Mr Hamish  
Farnsworth, Linsey  
Fenton-Glynn, Josh  
Ferguson, Mark  
Ferguson, Patricia  
Foody, Emma  
Fookes, Catherine  
Foster, Mr Paul  
Foxcroft, Vicky  
Francis, Daniel  
Frith, Mr James  
Gardiner, Barry  
Gardner, Dr Allison  
Gelderd, Anna  
Gemmell, Alan  
German, Gill  
Gilbert, Tracy  
Gill, Preet Kaur  
Gittins, Becky  
Glindon, Mary  
Gosling, Jodie  
Gould, Georgia  
Grady, John  
Greenwood, Lilian  
Griffith, Dame Nia  
Hack, Amanda  
Hamilton, Fabian  
Hamilton, Paulette

Hardy, Emma  
Hatton, Lloyd  
Hayes, Helen  
Hayes, Tom  
Hazelgrove, Claire  
Healey, rh John  
Hinchliff, Chris  
Hinder, Jonathan  
Hopkins, Rachel  
Hughes, Claire  
Hume, Alison  
Hurley, Patrick  
Hussain, Imran  
Ingham, Leigh  
Irons, Natasha  
Jameson, Sally  
Jarvis, Dan  
Jermy, Terry  
Jogee, Adam  
Johnson, rh Dame Diana  
Johnson, Kim  
Jones, rh Darren  
Jones, Gerald  
Jones, Lillian  
Jones, Louise  
Jones, Ruth  
Jones, Sarah  
Josan, Gurinder Singh  
Joseph, Sojan  
Juss, Warinder  
Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast  
by Chris Elmore*)  
Khan, Afzal  
Khan, Naushabah  
Kinnock, Stephen  
Kirkham, Jayne  
Kitchen, Gen  
Kumar, Sonia  
Kyle, rh Peter  
Kyrke-Smith, Laura  
Lavery, Ian  
Leadbeater, Kim  
Leishman, Brian  
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma  
Lewin, Andrew  
Lewis, Clive  
Long Bailey, Rebecca  
MacAlister, Josh  
Macdonald, Alice  
MacNae, Andy  
Madders, Justin  
Malhotra, Seema  
Maskell, Rachael  
Mather, Keir  
Mayer, Alex  
McAllister, Douglas  
McCarthy, Kerry  
McCluskey, Martin  
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain  
McDonald, Andy  
McDonald, Chris  
McDonnell, rh John  
McEvoy, Lola  
McFadden, rh Pat  
McGovern, Alison  
McIntyre, Alex  
McKee, Gordon  
McKenna, Kevin  
McMahon, Jim  
McMorrin, Anna  
McNally, Frank  
McNeill, Kirsty

Midgley, Anneliese  
Minns, Ms Julie  
Mishra, Navendu  
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  
Nandy, rh Lisa  
Narayan, Kanishka  
Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote  
cast by Chris Elmore*)  
Newbury, Josh  
Niblett, Samantha  
Nichols, Charlotte  
Norris, Alex  
Onn, Melanie  
Onwurah, Chi  
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena  
Osamor, Kate  
Osborne, Tristan  
Owatemi, Taiwo  
Owen, Sarah  
Paffey, Darren  
Patrick, Matthew  
Pennycook, Matthew  
Pinto-Duschinsky, David  
Pitcher, Lee  
Platt, Jo  
Powell, rh Lucy  
Poynton, Gregor  
Prinsley, Peter  
Quigley, Mr Richard  
Qureshi, Yasmin  
Rand, Mr Connor  
Ranger, Andrew  
Reader, Mike  
Reid, Joani  
Rhodes, Martin  
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell  
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny  
Rimmer, Ms Marie  
Robertson, David  
Robinson, rh Gavin  
Roca, Tim  
Rodda, Matt  
Rushworth, Sam  
Russell, Mrs Sarah  
Rutland, Tom  
Ryan, Oliver  
Sackman, Sarah  
Sandher, Dr Jeevun  
Scrogham, Michelle  
Sewards, Mark  
Shah, Naz  
Shanker, Baggy  
Shanks, Michael  
Shannon, Jim  
Siddiq, Tulip  
Simons, Josh  
Slaughter, Andy  
Slinger, John

Smith, David  
 Smith, Jeff  
 Smith, Nick  
 Smith, Sarah  
 Snell, Gareth  
 Stainbank, Euan  
 Stevens, rh Jo  
 Stevenson, Kenneth  
 Stewart, Elaine  
 Stone, Will  
 Strathern, Alistair  
 Streeting, rh Wes  
 Strickland, Alan  
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren  
 Sultana, Zarah  
 Swallow, Peter  
 Swann, Robin  
 Tami, rh Mark  
 Tapp, Mike  
 Taylor, Alison  
 Taylor, David  
 Taylor, Rachel  
 Thomas, Fred  
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick  
 Thompson, Adam  
 Tidball, Dr Marie  
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen  
 Toale, Jessica  
 Trickett, Jon

Tufnell, Henry  
 Turmaine, Matt  
 Turner, Laurence  
 Twigg, Derek  
 Twist, Liz  
 Uppal, Harpreet  
 Vaughan, Tony  
 Vince, Chris  
 Wakeford, Christian  
 Ward, Chris  
 Ward, Melanie  
 Waugh, Paul  
 Webb, Chris  
 Western, Andrew  
 Wheeler, Michael  
 Whitby, John  
 White, Jo  
 White, Katie  
 Williams, David  
 Witherden, Steve  
 Wrighting, Rosie  
 Yang, Yuan  
 Yasin, Mohammad  
 Yemm, Steve  
 Zeichner, Daniel

#### Tellers for the Noes:

Kate Dearden and  
 Anna Turley

*Question accordingly negated.*

#### New Clause 6

##### PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT: THE CROWN ESTATE AND GREAT BRITISH ENERGY

“The Chancellor of the Exchequer must lay before Parliament any partnership agreement between the Crown Estate and Great British Energy.”—(*James Wild.*)

*This new clause requires the Chancellor of the Exchequer to lay before Parliament any partnership agreement between the Crown Estate and Great British Energy.*

*Brought up, and read the First time.*

*Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.*

*The House divided: Ayes 100, Noes 312.*

#### Division No. 102]

[8.13 pm

#### AYES

Allister, Jim  
 Anderson, Lee  
 Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)  
 Andrew, rh Stuart  
 Argar, rh Edward  
 Atkins, rh Victoria  
 Bacon, Gareth  
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett  
 Bhatti, Saqib  
 Blackman, Bob  
 Bool, Sarah  
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen  
 Brandreth, Aphra  
 Burghart, Alex  
 Campbell, Mr Gregory  
 Cartledge, James  
 Chope, Sir Christopher  
 Cleverly, rh Mr James  
 Cocking, Lewis  
 Cooper, John  
 Costa, Alberto  
 Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)  
 Cross, Harriet  
 Davies, Ann  
 Davies, Gareth  
 Davies, Mims  
 Dewhirst, Charlie  
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver  
 Evans, Dr Luke  
 Fortune, Peter  
 Freeman, George  
 French, Mr Louie  
 Fuller, Richard  
 Gale, rh Sir Roger  
 Garnier, Mark  
 Grant, Helen  
 Griffiths, Alison (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)

Hayes, rh Sir John  
 Hinds, rh Damian  
 Hoare, Simon  
 Holden, rh Mr Richard  
 Hollinrake, Kevin  
 Holmes, Paul  
 Huddleston, Nigel  
 Hudson, Dr Neil  
 Hunt, rh Jeremy  
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard  
 Johnson, Dr Caroline  
 Jopp, Lincoln  
 Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)  
 Kruger, Danny  
 Lake, Ben  
 Lam, Katie  
 Lamont, John  
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward  
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian  
 Lopez, Julia  
 Mak, Alan  
 Malthouse, rh Kit  
 Medi, Llinos  
 Mohamed, Iqbal  
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan  
 Moore, Robbie  
 Morrissey, Joy  
 Morton, rh Wendy  
 Mullan, Dr Kieran  
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew  
 Obese-Jecty, Ben  
 O'Brien, Neil  
 Patel, rh Priti

Paul, Rebecca  
 Philp, rh Chris  
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)  
 Rankin, Jack  
 Reed, David  
 Robertson, Joe  
 Robinson, rh Gavin  
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz  
 Shannon, Jim  
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil  
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec  
 Simmonds, David  
 Smith, Greg  
 Smith, rh Sir Julian  
 Spencer, Dr Ben  
 Spencer, Patrick  
 Stafford, Gregory  
 Stride, rh Mel  
 Swann, Robin  
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
 Thomas, Bradley  
 Timothy, Nick  
 Vickers, Martin  
 Vickers, Matt  
 Whately, Helen  
 Wild, James  
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin  
 Wilson, rh Sammy  
 Wood, Mike  
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

#### Tellers for the Ayes:

Jerome Mayhew and  
 Sir Ashley Fox

#### NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)  
 Abbott, Jack  
 Abrahams, Debbie  
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir  
 Alaba, Mr Bayo  
 Aldridge, Dan  
 Alexander, rh Heidi  
 Al-Hassan, Sadik  
 Ali, Rushanara  
 Anderson, Callum  
 Anderson, Fleur  
 Asser, James  
 Athwal, Jas  
 Atkinson, Catherine  
 Atkinson, Lewis  
 Bailey, Mr Calvin  
 Baines, David  
 Baker, Alex  
 Baker, Richard  
 Bance, Antonia  
 Barker, Paula  
 Barron, Lee  
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex  
 Beales, Danny  
 Beavers, Lorraine  
 Begum, Apsana (*Proxy vote cast by Zarah Sultana*)  
 Bell, Torsten  
 Benn, rh Hilary  
 Billington, Ms Polly  
 Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
 Blake, Rachel  
 Bloore, Chris  
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
 Bonavia, Kevin  
 Botterill, Jade  
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena  
 Brash, Mr Jonathan  
 Bryant, Chris  
 Buckley, Julia  
 Burgon, Richard  
 Burke, Maureen  
 Byrne, Ian  
 Cadbury, Ruth  
 Caliskan, Nesil  
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan  
 Campbell, Irene  
 Campbell, Juliet  
 Campbell-Savours, Markus  
 Carns, Al  
 Champion, Sarah  
 Charalambous, Bambos  
 Coleman, Ben  
 Collinge, Lizzi  
 Collins, Tom  
 Conlon, Liam  
 Coombes, Sarah  
 Cooper, Andrew  
 Cooper, Dr Beccy  
 Costigan, Deirdre  
 Cox, Pam  
 Coyle, Neil  
 Craft, Jen  
 Creasy, Ms Stella  
 Crichton, Torcuil  
 Curtis, Chris

Daby, Janet  
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas  
 Dalton, Ashley  
 Darlington, Emily  
 Davies, Jonathan  
 Davies, Paul  
 Davies, Shaun  
 Dean, Josh  
 Dickson, Jim  
 Dixon, Samantha  
 Dodds, rh Anneliese  
 Dollimore, Helena  
 Doughty, Stephen  
 Dowd, Peter  
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil  
 Eagle, Dame Angela  
 Eagle, rh Maria  
 Edwards, Lauren  
 Edwards, Sarah  
 Efford, Clive  
 Ellis, Maya  
 Elmore, Chris  
 Entwistle, Kirith  
 Eshalomi, Florence  
 Evans, Chris  
 Falconer, Mr Hamish  
 Farnsworth, Linsey  
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh  
 Ferguson, Mark  
 Ferguson, Patricia  
 Foody, Emma  
 Fookes, Catherine  
 Foster, Mr Paul  
 Foxcroft, Vicky  
 Francis, Daniel  
 Frith, Mr James  
 Gardiner, Barry  
 Gardner, Dr Allison  
 Gelderd, Anna  
 Gemmell, Alan  
 German, Gill  
 Gilbert, Tracy  
 Gill, Preet Kaur  
 Gittins, Becky  
 Glindon, Mary  
 Gosling, Jodie  
 Gould, Georgia  
 Grady, John  
 Greenwood, Lilian  
 Griffith, Dame Nia  
 Hack, Amanda  
 Hamilton, Fabian  
 Hamilton, Paulette  
 Hardy, Emma  
 Hatton, Lloyd  
 Hayes, Helen  
 Hayes, Tom  
 Hazelgrove, Claire  
 Healey, rh John  
 Hinchliff, Chris  
 Hinder, Jonathan  
 Hopkins, Rachel  
 Hughes, Claire  
 Hume, Alison  
 Huq, Dr Rupa  
 Hurley, Patrick  
 Hussain, Imran  
 Ingham, Leigh  
 Irons, Natasha  
 Jameson, Sally  
 Jarvis, Dan  
 Jermy, Terry

Jogee, Adam  
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana  
 Johnson, Kim  
 Jones, rh Darren  
 Jones, Gerald  
 Jones, Lillian  
 Jones, Louise  
 Jones, Ruth  
 Jones, Sarah  
 Josan, Gurinder Singh  
 Joseph, Sojan  
 Juss, Warinder  
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
 Khan, Afzal  
 Khan, Naushabah  
 Kinnock, Stephen  
 Kirkham, Jayne  
 Kitchen, Gen  
 Kumar, Sonia  
 Kyle, rh Peter  
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura  
 Lavery, Ian  
 Leadbeater, Kim  
 Leishman, Brian  
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma  
 Lewin, Andrew  
 Lewis, Clive  
 Long Bailey, Rebecca  
 MacAlister, Josh  
 Macdonald, Alice  
 MacNae, Andy  
 Madders, Justin  
 Malhotra, Seema  
 Maskell, Rachael  
 Mather, Keir  
 Mayer, Alex  
 McAllister, Douglas  
 McCarthy, Kerry  
 McCluskey, Martin  
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain  
 McDonald, Andy  
 McDonald, Chris  
 McDonnell, rh John  
 McEvoy, Lola  
 McFadden, rh Pat  
 McGovern, Alison  
 McIntyre, Alex  
 McKee, Gordon  
 McKenna, Kevin  
 McMahon, Jim  
 McMorris, Anna  
 McNally, Frank  
 McNeill, Kirsty  
 Midgley, Anneliese  
 Minns, Ms Julie  
 Mishra, Navendu  
 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

Nandy, rh Lisa  
 Narayan, Kanishka  
 Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
 Newbury, Josh  
 Niblett, Samantha  
 Nichols, Charlotte  
 Norris, Alex  
 Onn, Melanie  
 Onwurah, Chi  
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena  
 Osamor, Kate  
 Osborne, Tristan  
 Owatemi, Taiwo  
 Owen, Sarah  
 Paffey, Darren  
 Patrick, Matthew  
 Pennycook, Matthew  
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David  
 Pitcher, Lee  
 Platt, Jo  
 Powell, rh Lucy  
 Poynton, Gregor  
 Prinsley, Peter  
 Quigley, Mr Richard  
 Qureshi, Yasmin  
 Rand, Mr Connor  
 Ranger, Andrew  
 Reader, Mike  
 Reid, Joani  
 Rhodes, Martin  
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell  
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny  
 Rimmer, Ms Marie  
 Robertson, Dave  
 Roca, Tim  
 Rodda, Matt  
 Rushworth, Sam  
 Russell, Mrs Sarah  
 Rutland, Tom  
 Ryan, Oliver  
 Sackman, Sarah  
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun  
 Scrogham, Michelle  
 Seward, Mark  
 Shah, Naz  
 Shanker, Baggy  
 Shanks, Michael  
 Siddiq, Tulip  
 Simons, Josh  
 Slaughter, Andy  
 Slinger, John  
 Smith, David  
 Smith, Jeff  
 Smith, Nick

Smith, Sarah  
 Snell, Gareth  
 Stainbank, Euan  
 Stevens, rh Jo  
 Stevenson, Kenneth  
 Stewart, Elaine  
 Stone, Will  
 Strathern, Alistair  
 Streeting, rh Wes  
 Strickland, Alan  
 Stringer, Graham  
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren  
 Sultana, Zarah  
 Swallow, Peter  
 Tami, rh Mark  
 Tapp, Mike  
 Taylor, Alison  
 Taylor, David  
 Taylor, Rachel  
 Thomas, Fred  
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick  
 Thompson, Adam  
 Tidball, Dr Marie  
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen  
 Toale, Jessica  
 Trickett, Jon  
 Tufnell, Henry  
 Turmaine, Matt  
 Turner, Laurence  
 Twigg, Derek  
 Twist, Liz  
 Uppal, Harpreet  
 Vaughan, Tony  
 Vince, Chris  
 Wakeford, Christian  
 Ward, Chris  
 Ward, Melanie  
 Waugh, Paul  
 Webb, Chris  
 Western, Andrew  
 Wheeler, Michael  
 Whitby, John  
 White, Jo  
 White, Katie  
 Williams, David  
 Witherden, Steve  
 Wrighting, Rosie  
 Yang, Yuan  
 Yasin, Mohammad  
 Yemm, Steve  
 Zeichner, Daniel

#### Tellers for the Noes:

Kate Dearden and  
 Anna Turley

*Question accordingly negated.*

#### Clause 1

##### POWER OF CROWN ESTATE COMMISSIONERS TO BORROW ETC

*Amendment proposed:* 4, page 1, line 26, at end insert—

- “(3) The Chancellor of the Exchequer must limit borrowing by the Crown Estate under this section by regulations made by statutory instrument, and these regulations may not be made unless a draft of the instrument has been laid before and approved by a resolution of each House of Parliament.
- (4) The first set of regulations made under subsection (3) must limit borrowing to a net debt to asset value ratio of no more than 25 per cent.”—(*James Wild.*)



*This amendment would limit the amount the Commissioners may borrow by regulations subject to the affirmative procedure for statutory instruments.*

*The House divided: Ayes 153, Noes 316.*

### Division No. 103]

[8.26 pm

#### AYES

Allister, Jim  
 Amos, Gideon  
 Anderson, Lee  
 Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)  
 Andrew, rh Stuart  
 Aquarone, Steff  
 Argar, rh Edward  
 Atkins, rh Victoria  
 Babarinde, Josh  
 Bacon, Gareth  
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett  
 Bennett, Alison  
 Bhatti, Saqib  
 Blackman, Bob  
 Bool, Sarah  
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen  
 Brandreth, Aphra  
 Brewer, Alex  
 Brown-Fuller, Jess  
 Burghart, Alex  
 Campbell, Mr Gregory  
 Cane, Charlotte  
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair  
 Cartlidge, James  
 Chadwick, David  
 Chamberlain, Wendy  
 Chambers, Dr Danny  
 Chope, Sir Christopher  
 Cleverly, rh Mr James  
 Cocking, Lewis  
 Collins, Victoria  
 Cooper, Daisy  
 Cooper, John  
 Costa, Alberto  
 Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)  
 Cross, Harriet  
 Dance, Adam  
 Davies, Ann  
 Davies, Gareth  
 Davies, Mims  
 Dean, Bobby  
 Dewhurst, Charlie  
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver  
 Evans, Dr Luke  
 Farron, Tim  
 Fortune, Peter  
 Franklin, Zöe  
 Freeman, George  
 French, Mr Louie  
 Fuller, Richard  
 Gale, rh Sir Roger  
 Garnier, Mark  
 George, Andrew  
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)  
 Glover, Olly  
 Goldman, Marie  
 Gordon, Tom  
 Grant, Helen  
 Green, Sarah  
 Griffiths, Alison (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)  
 Harding, Monica  
 Hayes, rh Sir John  
 Heylings, Pippa  
 Hinds, rh Damian  
 Hoare, Simon  
 Holden, rh Mr Richard  
 Hollinrake, Kevin  
 Holmes, Paul  
 Huddleston, Nigel  
 Hudson, Dr Neil  
 Hunt, rh Jeremy  
 Jarvis, Liz  
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard  
 Johnson, Dr Caroline  
 Jones, Clive  
 Jopp, Lincoln  
 Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)  
 Kohler, Mr Paul  
 Kruger, Danny  
 Lake, Ben  
 Lam, Katie  
 Lamont, John  
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward  
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian  
 Lopez, Julia  
 MacCleary, James  
 MacDonald, Mr Angus  
 Maguire, Ben  
 Maguire, Helen  
 Mak, Alan  
 Malthouse, rh Kit  
 Martin, Mike  
 Maynard, Charlie  
 Medi, Llinos  
 Miller, Calum  
 Mohamed, Iqbal  
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan  
 Moore, Robbie  
 Morgan, Helen  
 Morrison, Mr Tom (*Proxy vote cast by Dr Chambers*)  
 Morrissey, Joy  
 Morton, rh Wendy  
 Mullan, Dr Kieran  
 Munt, Tessa  
 Murray, Susan  
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew  
 Obese-Jecty, Ben  
 O'Brien, Neil  
 Patel, rh Priti  
 Paul, Rebecca  
 Perteghella, Manuela  
 Philp, rh Chris  
 Pinkerton, Dr Al  
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)  
 Rankin, Jack  
 Reed, David  
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua  
 Robertson, Joe  
 Robinson, rh Gavin  
 Roome, Ian  
 Sabine, Anna  
 Savage, Dr Roz  
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz

Shannon, Jim  
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil  
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec  
 Simmonds, David  
 Slade, Vikki  
 Smart, Lisa  
 Smith, Greg  
 Smith, rh Sir Julian  
 Sollom, Ian  
 Spencer, Dr Ben  
 Spencer, Patrick  
 Stafford, Gregory  
 Stride, rh Mel  
 Swann, Robin  
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond  
 Taylor, Luke  
 Thomas, Bradley

Timothy, Nick  
 Vickers, Martin  
 Vickers, Matt  
 Voaden, Caroline  
 Whately, Helen  
 Wild, James  
 Wilkinson, Max  
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin  
 Wilson, Munira  
 Wilson, rh Sammy  
 Wood, Mike  
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy  
 Young, Claire

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
 Jerome Mayhew and  
 Sir Ashley Fox

#### NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)  
 Abbott, Jack  
 Abrahams, Debbie  
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir  
 Alaba, Mr Bayo  
 Aldridge, Dan  
 Alexander, rh Heidi  
 Al-Hassan, Sadik  
 Ali, Rushanara  
 Anderson, Callum  
 Anderson, Fleur  
 Asser, James  
 Athwal, Jas  
 Atkinson, Catherine  
 Atkinson, Lewis  
 Bailey, Mr Calvin  
 Baines, David  
 Baker, Alex  
 Baker, Richard  
 Bance, Antonia  
 Barker, Paula  
 Barron, Lee  
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex  
 Beales, Danny  
 Beavers, Lorraine  
 Begum, Apsana (*Proxy vote cast by Zarah Sultana*)  
 Bell, Torsten  
 Benn, rh Hilary  
 Berry, Siân  
 Billington, Ms Polly  
 Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
 Blake, Rachel  
 Bloore, Chris  
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
 Bonavia, Kevin  
 Botterill, Jade  
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena  
 Brash, Mr Jonathan  
 Bryant, Chris  
 Buckley, Julia  
 Burgon, Richard  
 Burke, Maureen  
 Byrne, Ian  
 Cadbury, Ruth  
 Caliskan, Nesil  
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan  
 Campbell, Irene  
 Campbell, Juliet  
 Carns, Al  
 Champion, Sarah  
 Charalambous, Bambos  
 Chownes, Ellie  
 Coleman, Ben  
 Collinge, Lizzi  
 Collins, Tom  
 Conlon, Liam  
 Coombes, Sarah  
 Cooper, Andrew  
 Cooper, Dr Beccy  
 Costigan, Deirdre  
 Cox, Pam  
 Coyle, Neil  
 Craft, Jen  
 Creasy, Ms Stella  
 Crichton, Torcuil  
 Curtis, Chris  
 Daby, Janet  
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas  
 Dalton, Ashley  
 Darlington, Emily  
 Davies, Jonathan  
 Davies, Paul  
 Davies, Shaun  
 Dean, Josh  
 Denyer, Carla  
 Dickson, Jim  
 Dixon, Samantha  
 Dodds, rh Anneliese  
 Dollimore, Helena  
 Doughty, Stephen  
 Dowd, Peter  
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil  
 Eagle, Dame Angela  
 Eagle, rh Maria  
 Edwards, Lauren  
 Edwards, Sarah  
 Efford, Clive  
 Ellis, Maya  
 Elmore, Chris  
 Entwistle, Kirith  
 Eshalomi, Florence  
 Evans, Chris  
 Falconer, Mr Hamish  
 Farnsworth, Linsey  
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh  
 Ferguson, Mark  
 Ferguson, Patricia  
 Foody, Emma  
 Fookes, Catherine

Foster, Mr Paul  
 Foxcroft, Vicky  
 Francis, Daniel  
 Frith, Mr James  
 Gardiner, Barry  
 Gardner, Dr Allison  
 Gelderd, Anna  
 Gemmell, Alan  
 German, Gill  
 Gilbert, Tracy  
 Gill, Preet Kaur  
 Gittins, Becky  
 Glindon, Mary  
 Gosling, Jodie  
 Gould, Georgia  
 Grady, John  
 Greenwood, Lilian  
 Griffith, Dame Nia  
 Hack, Amanda  
 Hamilton, Fabian  
 Hamilton, Paulette  
 Hardy, Emma  
 Hatton, Lloyd  
 Hayes, Helen  
 Hayes, Tom  
 Hazelgrove, Claire  
 Healey, rh John  
 Hinchliff, Chris  
 Hinder, Jonathan  
 Hopkins, Rachel  
 Hughes, Claire  
 Hume, Alison  
 Huq, Dr Rupa  
 Hurley, Patrick  
 Hussain, Imran  
 Ingham, Leigh  
 Irons, Natasha  
 Jameson, Sally  
 Jarvis, Dan  
 Jermy, Terry  
 Jogie, Adam  
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana  
 Johnson, Kim  
 Jones, rh Darren  
 Jones, Gerald  
 Jones, Lillian  
 Jones, Louise  
 Jones, Ruth  
 Jones, Sarah  
 Josan, Gurinder Singh  
 Joseph, Sojan  
 Juss, Warinder  
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
 Khan, Afzal  
 Khan, Naushabah  
 Kinnock, Stephen  
 Kirkham, Jayne  
 Kitchen, Gen  
 Kumar, Sonia  
 Kyle, rh Peter  
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura  
 Lavery, Ian  
 Leadbeater, Kim  
 Leishman, Brian  
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma  
 Lewin, Andrew  
 Lewis, Clive  
 Long Bailey, Rebecca  
 MacAlister, Josh  
 Macdonald, Alice  
 MacNae, Andy

Madders, Justin  
 Malhotra, Seema  
 Maskell, Rachael  
 Mather, Keir  
 Mayer, Alex  
 McAllister, Douglas  
 McCarthy, Kerry  
 McCluskey, Martin  
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain  
 McDonald, Andy  
 McDonald, Chris  
 McDonnell, rh John  
 McEvoy, Lola  
 McFadden, rh Pat  
 McGovern, Alison  
 McIntyre, Alex  
 McKee, Gordon  
 McKenna, Kevin  
 McMahon, Jim  
 McMorris, Anna  
 McNally, Frank  
 McNeill, Kirsty  
 Midgley, Anneliese  
 Minns, Ms Julie  
 Mishra, Navendu  
 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  
 Nandy, rh Lisa  
 Narayan, Kanishka  
 Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
 Newbury, Josh  
 Niblett, Samantha  
 Nichols, Charlotte  
 Norris, Alex  
 Onn, Melanie  
 Onwurah, Chi  
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena  
 Osamor, Kate  
 Osborne, Tristan  
 Owatemi, Taiwo  
 Owen, Sarah  
 Paffey, Darren  
 Patrick, Matthew  
 Pennycook, Matthew  
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David  
 Pitcher, Lee  
 Platt, Jo  
 Powell, rh Lucy  
 Poynton, Gregor  
 Prinsley, Peter  
 Quigley, Mr Richard  
 Qureshi, Yasmin  
 Ramsay, Adrian  
 Rand, Mr Connor  
 Ranger, Andrew  
 Reader, Mike  
 Reid, Joani  
 Rhodes, Martin

Ribeiro-Addy, Bell  
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny  
 Rimmer, Ms Marie  
 Robertson, Dave  
 Roca, Tim  
 Rodda, Matt  
 Rushworth, Sam  
 Russell, Mrs Sarah  
 Rutland, Tom  
 Ryan, Oliver  
 Sackman, Sarah  
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun  
 Scrogham, Michelle  
 Sowards, Mark  
 Shah, Naz  
 Shanker, Baggy  
 Shanks, Michael  
 Siddiq, Tulip  
 Simons, Josh  
 Slaughter, Andy  
 Slinger, John  
 Smith, David  
 Smith, Jeff  
 Smith, Nick  
 Smith, Sarah  
 Snell, Gareth  
 Stainbank, Euan  
 Stevens, rh Jo  
 Stevenson, Kenneth  
 Stewart, Elaine  
 Stone, Will  
 Strathern, Alistair  
 Streeting, rh Wes  
 Strickland, Alan  
 Stringer, Graham  
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren  
 Sultana, Zarah  
 Swallow, Peter  
 Tami, rh Mark  
 Tapp, Mike

Taylor, Alison  
 Taylor, David  
 Taylor, Rachel  
 Thomas, Fred  
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick  
 Thompson, Adam  
 Tidball, Dr Marie  
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen  
 Toale, Jessica  
 Trickett, Jon  
 Tufnell, Henry  
 Turmaine, Matt  
 Turner, Laurence  
 Twigg, Derek  
 Twist, Liz  
 Uppal, Harpreet  
 Vaughan, Tony  
 Vince, Chris  
 Wakeford, Christian  
 Ward, Chris  
 Ward, Melanie  
 Waugh, Paul  
 Webb, Chris  
 Western, Andrew  
 Wheeler, Michael  
 Whitby, John  
 White, Jo  
 White, Katie  
 Williams, David  
 Witherden, Steve  
 Wrighting, Rosie  
 Yang, Yuan  
 Yasin, Mohammad  
 Yemm, Steve  
 Zeichner, Daniel

### Tellers for the Noes:

Kate Dearden and  
 Anna Turley

*Question accordingly negated.*

### Clause 3

#### SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

*Amendment proposed: 2, page 2, line 17, at end insert—*

“(3B) Any framework document published by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Crown Estate and the Commissioners must define ‘sustainable development’ for the purposes of this Act.

(3C) The definition under subsection (3B) must include reference to a climate and nature duty.

(3D) A ‘climate and nature duty’ means a duty to achieve any targets set out under Part 1 of the Climate Change Act 2008 or under sections 1 to 3 of the Environment Act 2021.”—(*Pippa Heylings.*)

*This amendment would ensure that this act's Framework Agreement must define “sustainable development”, and that the definition must include reference to a climate and nature duty.*

*Question put, That the amendment be made.*

*The House divided: Ayes 61, Noes 316.*

### Division No. 104]

[8.59 pm

#### AYES

Amos, Gideon  
 Aquarone, Steff  
 Babarinde, Josh  
 Bennett, Alison  
 Berry, Siân  
 Brewer, Alex

Brown-Fuller, Jess  
 Cane, Charlotte  
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair  
 Chadwick, David  
 Chamberlain, Wendy  
 Chambers, Dr Danny

Chowns, Ellie  
 Collins, Victoria  
 Cooper, Daisy  
 Dance, Adam  
 Davies, Ann  
 Dean, Bobby  
 Denyer, Carla  
 Farron, Tim  
 Franklin, Zöe  
 George, Andrew  
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)  
 Glover, Olly  
 Gordon, Tom  
 Green, Sarah  
 Harding, Monica  
 Heylings, Pippa  
 Jarvis, Liz  
 Jones, Clive  
 Kohler, Mr Paul  
 Lake, Ben  
 MacCleary, James  
 MacDonald, Mr Angus  
 Maguire, Helen  
 Martin, Mike  
 Medi, Llinos

Miller, Calum  
 Mohamed, Iqbal  
 Morgan, Helen  
 Morrison, Mr Tom (*Proxy vote cast by Dr Chambers*)  
 Munt, Tessa  
 Perteghella, Manuela  
 Pinkerton, Dr Al  
 Ramsay, Adrian  
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua  
 Roome, Ian  
 Sabine, Anna  
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz  
 Slade, Vikki  
 Smart, Lisa  
 Sollom, Ian  
 Swann, Robin  
 Taylor, Luke  
 Voaden, Caroline  
 Wilkinson, Max  
 Wilson, Munira  
 Young, Claire

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
**Susan Murray and**  
**Charlie Maynard**

#### NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)  
 Abbott, Jack  
 Abrahams, Debbie  
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir  
 Alaba, Mr Bayo  
 Aldridge, Dan  
 Alexander, rh Heidi  
 Al-Hassan, Sadik  
 Ali, Rushanara  
 Allister, Jim  
 Anderson, Callum  
 Anderson, Fleur  
 Asser, James  
 Athwal, Jas  
 Atkinson, Catherine  
 Atkinson, Lewis  
 Bailey, Mr Calvin  
 Baines, David  
 Baker, Alex  
 Baker, Richard  
 Bance, Antonia  
 Barker, Paula  
 Barron, Lee  
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex  
 Beales, Danny  
 Beavers, Lorraine  
 Begum, Apsana (*Proxy vote cast by Zarah Sultana*)  
 Bell, Torsten  
 Benn, rh Hilary  
 Billington, Ms Polly  
 Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
 Blake, Rachel  
 Bloore, Chris  
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
 Bonavia, Kevin  
 Botterill, Jade  
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena  
 Brash, Mr Jonathan

Bryant, Chris  
 Buckley, Julia  
 Burgon, Richard  
 Burke, Maureen  
 Byrne, Ian  
 Cadbury, Ruth  
 Caliskan, Nesil  
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan  
 Campbell, Mr Gregory  
 Campbell, Irene  
 Campbell, Juliet  
 Campbell-Savours, Markus  
 Carns, Al  
 Champion, Sarah  
 Charalambous, Bambos  
 Coleman, Ben  
 Collinge, Lizzi  
 Collins, Tom  
 Conlon, Liam  
 Coombes, Sarah  
 Cooper, Andrew  
 Cooper, Dr Beccy  
 Costigan, Deirdre  
 Cox, Pam  
 Coyle, Neil  
 Craft, Jen  
 Creasy, Ms Stella  
 Crichton, Torcuil  
 Curtis, Chris  
 Daby, Janet  
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas  
 Dalton, Ashley  
 Darlington, Emily  
 Davies, Jonathan  
 Davies, Paul  
 Davies, Shaun  
 Dean, Josh  
 Dickson, Jim  
 Dixon, Samantha  
 Dodds, rh Anneliese  
 Dollimore, Helena  
 Doughty, Stephen  
 Dowd, Peter

Duncan-Jordan, Neil  
 Eagle, Dame Angela  
 Eagle, rh Maria  
 Edwards, Lauren  
 Edwards, Sarah  
 Efford, Clive  
 Ellis, Maya  
 Elmore, Chris  
 Entwistle, Kirith  
 Eshalomi, Florence  
 Evans, Chris  
 Falconer, Mr Hamish  
 Farnsworth, Linsey  
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh  
 Ferguson, Mark  
 Ferguson, Patricia  
 Foody, Emma  
 Fookes, Catherine  
 Foster, Mr Paul  
 Foxcroft, Vicky  
 Francis, Daniel  
 Frith, Mr James  
 Gardiner, Barry  
 Gardner, Dr Allison  
 Gelderd, Anna  
 Gemmell, Alan  
 German, Gill  
 Gilbert, Tracy  
 Gill, Preet Kaur  
 Gittins, Becky  
 Glindon, Mary  
 Gosling, Jodie  
 Gould, Georgia  
 Grady, John  
 Greenwood, Lilian  
 Griffith, Dame Nia  
 Hack, Amanda  
 Hamilton, Fabian  
 Hamilton, Paulette  
 Hardy, Emma  
 Hatton, Lloyd  
 Hayes, Helen  
 Hayes, Tom  
 Hazelgrove, Claire  
 Healey, rh John  
 Hinchliff, Chris  
 Hinder, Jonathan  
 Hopkins, Rachel  
 Hughes, Claire  
 Hume, Alison  
 Huq, Dr Rupa  
 Hurley, Patrick  
 Hussain, Imran  
 Ingham, Leigh  
 Irons, Natasha  
 Jameson, Sally  
 Jarvis, Dan  
 Jermy, Terry  
 Jogee, Adam  
 Johnson, Kim  
 Jones, rh Darren  
 Jones, Gerald  
 Jones, Lillian  
 Jones, Louise  
 Jones, Ruth  
 Jones, Sarah  
 Josan, Gurinder Singh  
 Joseph, Sojan  
 Juss, Warinder  
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
 Khan, Afzal

Khan, Naushabah  
 Kinnock, Stephen  
 Kirkham, Jayne  
 Kitchen, Gen  
 Kumar, Sonia  
 Kyle, rh Peter  
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura  
 Lavery, Ian  
 Leadbeater, Kim  
 Leishman, Brian  
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma  
 Lewin, Andrew  
 Lewis, Clive  
 Long Bailey, Rebecca  
 MacAlister, Josh  
 Macdonald, Alice  
 MacNae, Andy  
 Madders, Justin  
 Malhotra, Seema  
 Maskell, Rachael  
 Mather, Keir  
 Mayer, Alex  
 McAllister, Douglas  
 McCarthy, Kerry  
 McCluskey, Martin  
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain  
 McDonald, Andy  
 McDonald, Chris  
 McDonnell, rh John  
 McEvoy, Lola  
 McFadden, rh Pat  
 McGovern, Alison  
 McIntyre, Alex  
 McKee, Gordon  
 McKenna, Kevin  
 McMahon, Jim  
 McMorris, Anna  
 McNally, Frank  
 McNeill, Kirsty  
 Midgley, Anneliese  
 Minns, Ms Julie  
 Mishra, Navendu  
 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  
 Nandy, rh Lisa  
 Narayan, Kanishka  
 Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)  
 Newbury, Josh  
 Niblett, Samantha  
 Nichols, Charlotte  
 Norris, Alex  
 Onn, Melanie  
 Onwurah, Chi  
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena  
 Osamor, Kate  
 Osborne, Tristan  
 Owatemi, Taiwo  
 Owen, Sarah



Paffey, Darren	Strathern, Alistair
Patrick, Matthew	Streeting, rh Wes
Pennycook, Matthew	Strickland, Alan
Pinto-Duschinsky, David	Stringer, Graham
Pitcher, Lee	Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Platt, Jo	Sultana, Zarah
Powell, rh Lucy	Swallow, Peter
Poynton, Gregor	Tami, rh Mark
Prinsley, Peter	Tapp, Mike
Quigley, Mr Richard	Taylor, Alison
Qureshi, Yasmin	Taylor, David
Rand, Mr Connor	Taylor, Rachel
Ranger, Andrew	Thomas, Fred
Reader, Mike	Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Reid, Joani	Thompson, Adam
Rhodes, Martin	Tidball, Dr Marie
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell	Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny	Toale, Jessica
Rimmer, Ms Marie	Trickett, Jon
Robertson, Dave	Tufnell, Henry
Robinson, rh Gavin	Turmaine, Matt
Roca, Tim	Turner, Laurence
Rodda, Matt	Twigg, Derek
Rushworth, Sam	Twist, Liz
Russell, Mrs Sarah	Uppal, Harpreet
Rutland, Tom	Vaughan, Tony
Ryan, Oliver	Vince, Chris
Sackman, Sarah	Wakeford, Christian
Sandher, Dr Jeevun	Ward, Chris
Scrogham, Michelle	Ward, Melanie
Sewards, Mark	Waugh, Paul
Shah, Naz	Webb, Chris
Shanker, Baggy	Western, Andrew
Shanks, Michael	Wheeler, Michael
Shannon, Jim	Whitby, John
Siddiq, Tulip	White, Jo
Simons, Josh	White, Katie
Slaughter, Andy	Williams, David
Slinger, John	Witherden, Steve
Smith, David	Wrighting, Rosie
Smith, Jeff	Yang, Yuan
Smith, Nick	Yasin, Mohammad
Smith, Sarah	Yemm, Steve
Snell, Gareth	Zeichner, Daniel
Stainbank, Euan	
Stevens, rh Jo	
Stevenson, Kenneth	
Stewart, Elaine	
Stone, Will	

#### Tellers for the Noes:

Kate Dearden and  
Anna Turley

*Question accordingly negatived.*

*Third Reading*

*King's consent signified.*

8.51 pm

**James Murray:** I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

The Crown Estate is an independent commercial business with a varied portfolio of assets across London, and with marine, rural and urban holdings. It operates for profit and competes in the marketplace for investment opportunities. However, it is governed by legislation that has not changed since 1961. That is why the Bill is focused on modernising the Crown Estate by removing limitations that, if unchanged, would hamper its ability to compete and invest as a commercial business.

The central aim of the Bill has been to ensure that the Crown Estate has a sustainable future for decades to come. Through these targeted and measured changes to its founding legislation, particularly in respect of its

investment and borrowing powers, the Government are building on the Crown Estate's strong track record of success in creating long-term prosperity for the nation. The changes will ensure that the Crown Estate has flexibility to support sustainable projects and preserve our heritage for generations to come. Crucially, the measures will unlock more long-term investment, helping to drive growth across the UK.

The Bill has been strengthened and improved in its passage through both Houses. It has been amended to require the Crown Estate's board to include commissioners with special responsibility for giving advice about England, Wales and Northern Ireland. That will ensure that the Crown Estate continues to work in the best interests of the UK. There have also been changes to strengthen its transparency and accountability, for example through the requirement for the Crown Estate to report on its activities under the partnership with Great British Energy, and the requirement to keep its activities under review with regards to the achievement of sustainable development.

I thank all hon. Members and all noble Lords in the other place for their thorough consideration and scrutiny of the Bill, and for the many and varied amendments that have been tabled and debated. I also thank everyone who has played a role in getting the Bill to this stage, including my colleagues in the Treasury, Members from across the House who took the time to provide scrutiny, all the parliamentary staff who worked on the Bill, and the officials in my Department who have put in a significant amount of time and effort. I am grateful for the broad support for the Bill from across all Benches. It will ensure that the Crown Estate can operate successfully for many more decades to come. I commend the Bill to the House.

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

8.54 pm

**James Wild:** I thank hon. Members from across the House, and my noble Friends, who have worked hard to scrutinise this important legislation. I also thank the Exchequer Secretary for the constructive approach he has taken throughout these proceedings, as did the Financial Secretary, particularly on seabed protections, as well as the Public Bill Office, and everyone who has helped to scrutinise the Bill.

There is support across the House for the aims of the Bill, which will deliver the modernisation that the Crown Estate needs, and should generate greater returns for the Exchequer. We are disappointed, however, that the Government have resisted our proposals for greater transparency and appropriate parliamentary oversight, including on borrowing. Similarly, the Crown Estate is about to embark on a novel partnership with GB Energy, and the lack of clarity around that partnership—notwithstanding the limited transparency through the annual report—is a concern. It raises concerns about the political pressure that may be brought to bear on the partnership to persuade it to fund the Energy Secretary's costly plans. Notwithstanding those concerns, we support the legislation. However, we will be watching carefully to ensure that the primary purpose of the Crown Estate—to maintain and enhance its assets for the benefit of the nation, as well as the income derived from it—is protected.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.*

## Business without Debate

### DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

#### SOCIAL SECURITY

That the draft Mesothelioma Lump Sum Payments (Conditions and Amounts) (Amendment) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 9 January, be approved.—(*Jeff Smith.*)

*Question agreed to.*

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

That the draft Pneumoconiosis etc. (Workers' Compensation) (Payment of Claims) (Amendment) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 9 January, be approved.—(*Jeff Smith.*)

*Question agreed to.*

### BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

*Ordered,*

That notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee in respect of the Church of Scotland (Lord High Commissioner) Bill may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before it has been read a second time.—(*Lucy Powell.*)

### ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT

*Ordered,*

That Sammy Wilson be a member of the Environmental Audit Committee.—(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

## Bank Closures: Rural Areas

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

8.57 pm

**Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): We now have the enjoyable prospect of an Adjournment debate lasting an hour and a half, which I know will fill the Minister with joy. I can see the boyish smile on his face—he just cannot contain himself. I do not intend to take an hour and a half, although a number of colleagues from across the House have indicated that they wish to intervene.

I am very pleased to have secured this debate. It is clear that our banking world is going through a period of transition. There are changes in technology; there is the move—some would say at too high a speed—towards a soon-to-be cashless society; and there is the cost of running branches, which includes insurance, business rates, staff costs and the like. I know full well that the closure of a high-street bank hits an area hard, whether the area is urban or rural. However, North Dorset is a rural constituency, and the thrust of my thesis is that the impact is felt disproportionately harder in rural communities than in an urban setting.

Why do I say that? I do not believe that North Dorset is unique in how it operates. [*Interruption.*] Heckling from the cheap seats. Our market towns operate on a hub-and-spoke model: the market town grows, and the villages are magnetised towards it, which is good for businesses large and small across the sectors, as we all recognise. It is also good for community cohesion at a time when we are all rightly concerned about rural exclusion and isolation; it brings people together. Our rural areas, by accident rather than by design, contain a disproportionately high number of retired or elderly people.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Simon Hoare:** I will, although the hon. Gentleman is neither retired nor elderly.

**Jim Shannon:** The hon. Gentleman is very kind. I commend him on bringing forward this debate. He is right to highlight elderly people. Social isolation is an issue for many people, not just those who are elderly or vulnerable, and it is worsened by the loss of basic banking. The hon. Gentleman told me before the debate that he has lost 14 banks. I have lost 11 banks in my constituency in Northern Ireland, which means that going to the bank becomes an all-day job, taking buses and making connections. Does he agree that there is a moral obligation on banks to ensure that they look after their customers? Indeed, if the banks do not do it under a moral obligation, does he think it is time for the Minister to make legislation to make it a legal obligation?

**Simon Hoare:** I agree. I will certainly come on to what I am asking the Government to consider, but the hon. Gentleman is right to talk about social isolation. We have lost 14 banks in my constituency since 2015. In 440 square miles, we have five banks remaining. We have had a fall of 74%. Across the county of Dorset, which includes the major conurbations of Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, we have had a decrease of 68%

[*Simon Hoare*]

overall, with 101 branches closed and only 48 remaining in the whole of the county. Eight parliamentary constituencies are served by just 48 banks.

My constituent Deborah Jones made a good point in response to a recent announcement by Lloyds that it is closing its branch in Blandford Forum, a market town in my constituency with a large village hinterland. With the exception of Nationwide, it now has no proper, traditional high street branch.

**Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): The hon. Member mentioned Nationwide. My understanding is that 142 towns in the UK do not have a bank, and many are left only with a building society. It seems that the banks have exited while the building societies have stayed behind. I would appreciate his thoughts on what that says about the lack of community cohesion as a result of losing those banks. Often we are losing post offices at the same time.

**Simon Hoare:** The hon. Lady is right. She allows me to pause to pay tribute to the Post Office and to members of the Association of Convenience Stores, which have stepped in to provide some level of service in those areas where the banks have gone. That brings me to one of my key asks of the banks, and the Minister as well. Yet again, a rubric seems to be used to argue in favour of closures that is blind to whether it is an urban or a rural setting. That differential needs to be taken into account.

**Dame Karen Bradley** (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Simon Hoare:** I will, but I just want to make the point that was well made by my constituent in her email. She is a customer of Lloyds in Blandford and she does online banking, but during the storm, her digital services were down. She needed to do some important banking and had no way of doing it. She asks how her 92-year-old mother-in-law, who no longer drives and does not use the internet or have a mobile phone, is to contact her bank. At the moment, she is taken into Blandford every Wednesday for shopping and can pop into the bank. What will she do? She is a very independent lady and not ready to hand over all her affairs to a family member just because they have internet access. A number of organisations have drawn attention to that issue, such as Age UK in 2023. But before I get to that, I give way to my right hon. Friend.

**Dame Karen Bradley:** I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. In Leek in my constituency we are about to lose our last two banks. We will be left with a building society with a cashpoint and the post office, yet Link has done a review suggesting that we do not need a banking hub because there are sufficient branches 9 or 10 miles away. That does not take account of rurality. We are a market town with, as he rightly described, a hub-and-spoke model, and it simply is not possible for elderly people to get to those other bank branches that are not easily accessible and are not on bus routes. Does he agree that rurality and topography are incredibly important and should be considered when deciding on banking hubs?

**Simon Hoare:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. When a bank closed in my constituency on an earlier occasion, I remember it telling me, "If customers need to talk to an actual person, they could use the branch in Poole." I explained that that was right, but it would take two days out of the week, because those customers would have to get a bus to Poole, book a hotel, stay over and get the return bus the following day. It did sound a little bit nonsensical. I am therefore grateful to my right hon. Friend for underlining the point that I am seeking to make: there must be rural-proofing of the rubric for these decisions in the first instance and a better understanding of the geography of our rural areas as well as of the lack of public transport or other connectivity between the two places.

It is easy—dare I say it—if one represents Ealing, where the Minister is from. There are plenty of buses and tubes, and heaven knows what else, that I have no doubt will take the people around Ealing. North Dorset does not have those things, and nor do many of our rural areas, but I just do not think that point is recognised by the banks.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con) *rose—*

**Luke Myer** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab) *rose—*

**Simon Hoare:** Let me make a little progress and I will give way first to my hon. Friend and then to the hon. Gentleman.

At the heart of everything this place does, we must think about social inclusion and trying to deliver services that meet the needs of a wide range of our population. According to Age UK, four in 10 adults over the age of 65 do not bank online, and three quarters of those who are over 65 have expressed the very clear desire that they wish to bank in person. The over-80s, people with disabilities and those on low incomes disproportionately want physical facilities, and yet they are being denied them.

As the Royal National Institute of Blind People points out, in my constituency alone there are, I think, 4,170 constituents who are either blind or partially sighted. They are unable to conduct banking online. Why are we excluding them from the personal management of their financial affairs?

**Sir Bernard Jenkin:** I congratulate my hon. Friend on obtaining this debate, which has attracted a large number of colleagues; he has touched a nerve. May I enter a plea on behalf of coastal towns such as Harwich, which suffer exactly the same difficulties as somewhere like Blandford Forum? In Harwich, the TSB has closed down and the Halifax has closed down, and that is affecting business in the town. Businesses need a banking hub. The Government have really got to come up with a solution, and a single hub representing all these financial institutions must be able to provide some kind of efficiency. I very much look forward to hearing my hon. Friend's proposals.

**Simon Hoare:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend. His constituency, and indeed a lot of our coastal communities, will have that profile of constituents that is older and



more settled, and they will want to see things delivered in the way that they are used to. That does not mean that they shun change completely, but they do have a legitimate expectation.

Let me take the House briefly through the timeline narrative of justification, and then I will give way to the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Luke Myer). You and I, Madam Deputy Speaker, as part of that great Tory intake of 2015—those were the days; it is nearly 10 years—will remember being told that there would never be a town without a bank.

**Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way on that point?

**Simon Hoare:** Let me just finish this point.

That was the first promise, but it seemed to disappear quite quickly. Then the Post Office came in, and then there seemed to be an over-reliance on building societies. I notice that Nationwide—I think it is Nationwide; I could be wrong—is saying in its television advertisement that it pledges not to close a branch before 2028, but it is under exactly the same cost and other pressures as its high street competitors.

Then we were told that the answer to the maiden's prayer was going to be the banking hub, but there has been quite a lot of disappointment surrounding that. I suggest to the Minister that that is in part to do with the erroneous conflation of access to cash and access to banking services. Link has assessed, perfectly properly, that in Blandford there are ATMs at the local Tesco, at the local Morrison's and at Nationwide, but just try asking an ATM to amend or set up a standing order or direct debit. A small businessman or businesswoman who wants to extend their line of credit or has a question mark over something cannot ask an ATM those questions. Saying that there is access to cash, as important as that is, is far too blunt an instrument when trying to assess the impact of these closures.

**Luke Myer:** North Dorset is quite far away from the north-east, but many of the issues the hon. Gentleman is talking about are issues that I am encountering in my constituency as well. The rural side of my constituency in East Cleveland contains many villages and towns with high deprivation and high rurality, and I am endeavouring to get a banking hub in one of those towns that has lost access to banks over many years. Does he agree that deprivation needs to be included as a metric alongside rurality?

**Simon Hoare:** I agree absolutely. A more sensitive and refined definition of the hub-and-spoke model is also needed. If we look at the resident catchment of a market town, we can construct a compelling argument that a proposal for a hub does not stack up, but we must add in the thousands of people who live in the villages that look to it and are magnetised to it, and who will spend more money in those businesses, and the businesses themselves—not just individuals—who use those businesses.

**Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Simon Hoare:** Let me give way to my hon. Friend from Surrey and then I will give way to the hon. Lady.

**Gregory Stafford:** I would not like to claim that I am the Member of Parliament for the whole of Surrey. My Hampshire residents would not be pleased about that. Just last Friday, the Barclays bank in Farnham closed, leaving the whole of my constituency of 101,000 people with just one bank, Santander, and one building society, Nationwide. We are lucky enough to have a banking hub in Haslemere, and we are going to get another one in Whitehill and Bordon—Liphook does not have one—but given that there are only 100 banking hubs across the country and that the Government say they are going to put forward 350, does my hon. Friend agree that the Government are going to have to turbocharge those banking hubs, not just for access to cash, but more especially, as he mentioned, for proper banking services for residents in rural constituencies?

**Simon Hoare:** I agree entirely with my hon. Friend who represents Surrey and part of Hampshire.

I would be happy for the Minister to write to me on this point if it is easier, but it strikes me that there is scope for a little bit of wiggle room with regard to the Financial Services and Markets Act 2023. The Act did not give the Financial Conduct Authority powers to reflect on and assess wider banking services. The Minister's party, when in opposition, was very keen that it should do so. When my party was in government, for some unknown reason we resisted amendments to that effect, and Labour, then in opposition, did not push them to a Division. I just think that there is too gaping a lacuna in all of this, in that it is only access to cash that is assessed, and not access to banking services.

**Harriet Cross** (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Simon Hoare:** Let me give way to the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan), then I will give way to my hon. Friend.

**Helen Morgan:** The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech outlining the issues. In North Shropshire, four of my five market towns have lost all their banks and only two of them will get a banking hub. Does he agree that we need to look at a much wider area to make those banking hubs work, because people who work in small hamlets and villages without access to public transport simply cannot access one that is maybe 20 miles away?

**Simon Hoare:** The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Again, I hope that any of the banks or regulators who may listen in or read the report will understand that this is not an issue that divides by party; it affects constituents across the country irrespective of which party represents them in this place. The key point is to have a proper assessment of rurality and the differential of living in a rural area compared with an urban area.

I commend the Government for their support for hubs, but they need to be more physical and robust in driving them forward. It is almost as if the banks are marking their own homework as to whether the argument in favour of a hub stacks up. As Sarah Coles of Hargreaves Lansdown commented a year or so ago:

"The closure of bank branches is a vicious circle. The more that close, the more people move online".

[Simon Hoare]

Of course, by definition, the more people move online, the more that almost hollows out the argument to justify creating a hub.

I understand that initially the banks were slightly reticent, just as the mobile phone operators were about shared masts—that somehow clients would be pinched and all the rest of it—but the hubs are a shared facility jointly financed by the banks. Those banks need to remember that they are still in business principally due to the good will of the British taxpayer and the Exchequer during the financial crash of 2008, who keep our banking sector afloat. They owe a little bit of payback, as a number of my constituents have been keen to point out.

The hubs seem to work and fill that gap; but as I say, marking one's own homework and setting the rubric to decide whether a hub will work is not right. The Treasury could take a more engaged and proactive leadership role on the matter.

**Harriet Cross:** I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important and timely debate. I certainly spent a lot of my recess looking at banking hubs, especially in a town called Ellon in my constituency, which has recently lost its last bank. Ellon is a large town of over 7,000 people, and if the surrounding villages are included, it is getting up towards 11,000 people. However, it does not qualify for a banking hub. Link has not given its permission to have a banking hub, saying that there are not enough businesses in the town. It does not take into account, for example, the farming businesses, and the rural nature of the area, as we have touched on, is not taken into account in the criteria set out by Link.

I am glad that my hon. Friend mentioned the importance of “rural-proofing” the conditions that Link looks at to deliver a banking hub. I hope that this debate and the Minister's response will put some pressure on Link to look more holistically at the rural environment when it comes to considering hubs, because places like Ellon need a banking hub.

**Simon Hoare:** I am grateful to my hon. Friend, because again she enhances and underlines the argument that I have been deploying, and for which colleagues across the House have been kind enough to add their support.

I suppose my annoyance is that the people who write the policies, whether they are the regulators or those in the bank boardrooms, do not know what living in a rural area is like. If they are in the Square Mile, they are not part of a rural community. They may have a getaway weekend retreat that they dash off to in their personalised number-plated Land Rover or Range Rover, in which they take their food down from Waitrose, before coming back to London on the Sunday, but that is not living in a rural area. That is not running a business in a rural area.

**David Smith** (North Northumberland) (Lab) *rose*—

**Simon Hoare:** I give way to the hon. Member for North Northumberland, which really is a rural area.

**David Smith:** I thank the hon. Member for securing the debate. He mentioned the Square Mile there. In my constituency of North Northumberland—the third largest in England—there are eight branches in 2,100 square kilometres. That has gone down by 64% since 2015.

I want to highlight a point raised elsewhere in the debate. Banking hubs are important and, like other Members, I am pushing for them in my constituency; but again, the role of the Post Office in those banking services is key. We had to fight together as a community to secure Wooler post office. I must give credit to Glendale Gateway Trust for securing that. Does the hon. Member agree that post offices are absolutely vital and part of the solution to this problem?

**Simon Hoare:** The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. In many respects—[*Interruption.*] I am beginning to get paranoid; I hear voices. He is absolutely right to make the point that he does. I pay tribute to how the Post Office has stepped up. Very often, in providing that sort of transactional bank service, it has supported the continuance of rural post offices, which can often be marginal and fragile businesses themselves. Again, I think it an easy crutch to lean on to say, “Well, of course, the post office does this.” We can all applaud what post offices do, but customers cannot use them to talk to someone from their bank to discuss their overdraft, loan, mortgage, business credit card maximum or whatever it may happen to be.

I say to the Minister that we want our local businesses and small and medium enterprises to flourish—small, micro and family-owned businesses are very much the hallmark of a rural economy—and they have the greatest need, on a more regular basis, for that relationship with their banks. Then, the banks know the nature of the business and its long-term viability, and they can build that relationship.

**Wendy Chamberlain:** Will the hon. Member give way a second time?

**Simon Hoare:** For a second time, of course.

**Wendy Chamberlain:** I am grateful to him for giving way a second time. He is making an important point. One of the things that I have always found interesting is that when a bank has closed in North East Fife, it offers to deliver not an access-to-cash service but some kind of pop-up banking advice service in the constituency. That suggests to me that banks know very well that giving banking service advice is important. Instead of doing it as a sop for a number of months before giving up, they need to do it on a more regular and permanent basis.

**Simon Hoare:** The hon. Lady is again absolutely right. Surely it makes good commercial sense for high street banks, as we used to call them—increasingly, they are not particularly high street banks—to be able to tout their wares to existing or potential customers. That is how to generate business: by having a presence. A hub makes a very good presence for them all, but they seem to move at the speed of the slowest, and if one is not particularly convinced, the whole thing sort of seems to fall down. I know that the Government are trying to do more on that, but I think they could do even more to turbocharge it.

**Jayne Kirkham** (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Falmouth is to have a banking hub. We are losing our last bank; Lloyds is going at the end of the year. The interesting thing about that is that the banking hub will be open 9 to 5, five days a week—and potentially even

more—whereas the banks were very slowly cutting their opening hours after covid, and it was hard to find a bank outside school hours. That of course did not help rural businesses, which could not get there in time.

**Simon Hoare:** The hon. Lady is right. The cynic might suggest that the opening hours were set in order to try to deliberately reduce footfall—possibly. That might be hugely cynical, and if it is, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will plead guilty as charged.

**Dame Karen Bradley:** Will my hon. Friend indulge me a second time?

**Simon Hoare:** Who could refuse?

**Dame Karen Bradley:** My hon. Friend is so very generous to indulge me a second time during his excellent speech. I am struck by the impact on charities. As any trustee of a charity will know, trustees quite regularly have to prove their identity at the bank that the charity chooses to bank with. When it is simply not possible for trustees to get to a branch of the bank to prove their identity, the impact on rural charities will be devastating.

**Simon Hoare:** I admire my right hon. Friend's perseverance in ever trying to change the signatory on a charity bank account. People have died of boredom and exasperation trying to do it. A 60-year-old has to turn up with their great grandparents, their first cat and everything else to prove who they are. The fact that the bank has known them as a private customer for years seems to pass it by.

I hope I have made my points to the Minister, but let me rehearse them very briefly in bullet point form. One concerns the rubric to defend a bank closure. The assessment of access to cash needs a rural dimension, and there needs to be a much more granular understanding of the hub-and-spoke geography of a rural economy, which is very different from an urban one. We need to move away pretty quickly from merely assessing as satisfactory access to cash as defined by access to an ATM.

We need to turbocharge the delivery of hubs and bring pressure to bear on the banks, and there are a variety to do that. It can be carrot and stick, through tax and other policies, to try to nudge them to move at a faster pace. I hope, however, that the Government will take the lead on social inclusion for our rural areas, reflecting the fact that they have far more small, independent shops and businesses, and that the population is disproportionately older and/or retired and dealing with disabilities, infirmities, frailties and so on. Those things should be taken into account, and I remain to be convinced that they are.

I think an opportunity exists to amend the Financial Services and Markets Act 2023 to give the FCA greater powers to look at wider banking services, not just cash. Our rural communities struggle. Our economies are fragile, and wages are usually lower than in urban counterparts. Another bank closure is not just another bank closure in a rural market town.

**James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab):** Although I welcome banking hubs, I am increasingly concerned that banks see them as an excuse to accelerate the closure of core services. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that pressure needs to be applied, first and foremost, to the banks to

keep branches open on the high street, and that banking hubs should remain as an infill as opposed to being seen as the solution? That is the danger when we, as a collective, talk so frequently about banking hubs.

**Simon Hoare:** The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. I think the trend has been pretty clear, and the goalposts have moved. From late 2008 or 2009 through to about 2015 or 2016, I think the Government could and should have been much tougher and more exacting, but we are where we are. I take his point and I understand it, but let us not let the delivery of the good be sacrificed in pursuit of the excellent, which seems unattainable.

I think the trend in what the banks are doing is pretty well set, and it is probably irreversible. All sorts of things play into that. What I think is arrestable is the attitude of, “We will pull out even if we are the last branch open, and somebody else will pick up the slack”—principally the Post Office—or “We expect our customers to travel great distances to find a bank that is open and can help them.” That may require a number of visits in the case of something like an overdraft.

That is where the idea of a hub comes in. I understand that we are due to have our first hub in Dorset at some point this year—in Sherborne, in the constituency of the hon. Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello)—but North Dorset needs one as well. I will certainly be campaigning for one in Blandford. I would value the support of the Treasury Bench to emphasise to the banks that they have a duty of care to their customers, and they cannot just cut them adrift and say, “Make your own way. Find an alternative. Beat a path to another branch. It is terribly inconvenient for you, but that is what we are telling you to do, because we have no social responsibility at all.”

For the sake of our rural communities, economy and businesses, for charities and the farming community, and for a host of other people who want that personal interaction because they do not have access to the internet, or do not want to use online banking or an app and so on, there should be a bank teller, as we used to call them, from a bank, in a hub at set times, to help their customers. By so doing they will not damage our rural and market town economies as much as many of us fear, and as many hon. Members have attested to in this short debate.

9.30 pm

**The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray):** I commend the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare) for securing this debate. He has ensured that the views and concerns of his constituents have been heard by Ministers this evening, and he has set out the particular dynamics of the role of banking hubs in rural communities. The fact that he received so many interventions from other hon. Members underscores how important this issue is to constituents across the country, and I thank him for securing this important debate.

It might be helpful if I outline some of the context around this issue. In recent years, people across the UK have reaped the benefit of the transformations of the UK's banking sector, particularly the enhanced accessibility and convenience afforded by remote banking. For example, in 2017 40% of UK adults regularly used a bank branch, but by 2022 only 21 % of UK adults did so, and almost



[James Murray]

nine in 10 banked online or used a mobile app. Notably, that includes 65% of the over-75s. However, the Government recognise that those changes have presented considerable challenges for others.

Bank branch closures can have a particular impact on rural communities given the distances to alternatives—indeed, we heard examples of that from the hon. Member for North Dorset, and other hon. Members who intervened to highlight specific cases and to draw the House's attention to the challenges facing their constituents. I assure hon. Members, and the people they represent, that this Government understand the importance of face-to-face banking, and banking access, to local communities and high streets. Our objective is to ensure that people and businesses have access to banking services, supporting local communities and local economic growth. Work on that is well under way, and we are working closely with banks to open 350 banking hubs by the end of this Parliament. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor marked the opening of the 100th banking hub in December, and more than 200 hubs have been announced in total.

**Jim Shannon:** The hon. Member for North Dorset referred to 14 banks closing, and I referred to 11 closing. When it comes to the criteria for agreeing where those bank hubs will be, will the Minister reassure me that those constituents who have lost the most banks will be those who get more banking hubs when the opportunity comes through?

**James Murray:** The hon. Gentleman highlights how this issue affects communities right across the UK, and in a moment I will turn to the criteria by which the locations of banking hubs are decided—hon. Members have raised that important issue, and put on record their concerns and feelings about it.

Banking hubs offer counter services provided by post office staff, which allows personal and business customers of more than 30 banks and building societies to withdraw and deposit cash, deposit cheques, pay bills and check their balance. They also, crucially, contain rooms where customers can see community bankers from their bank to carry out wider banking services, such as registering a bereavement or help with changing a PIN. As the hon. Member for North Dorset pointed out, banking hubs offer more than just access to cash—that is an important point regarding why such hubs can bring so much to an area that has otherwise lost its local banks.

Community banking hubs can clearly contribute a great deal to local areas where existing banks have closed, and decisions over the opening of a hub are guided by the Financial Conduct Authority's regulations. In response to the question from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), it may be helpful for me to briefly outline how the FCA's process works. When a bank announces a closure, Link, the operator of the UK's largest ATM network, conducts an impartial assessment of a community's access to cash needs. Link considers criteria such as population size, the number of small businesses and levels of vulnerability, as well as the distance to the nearest branch, and the cost and time taken to get there via public transport.

Should Link recommend a banking hub, Cash Access UK, a not-for-profit entity funded by major UK banks, will implement it. Crucially, a bank branch cannot close until any recommended services are in place. Additionally, individuals, including Members of Parliament, can directly request an access to cash review via the Link website. In collaboration with industry, the Government remain committed to advancing the roll-out of these hubs.

It is worth pointing out that customers have alternative options for accessing everyday banking services. Notably, 99% of personal and 95% of business banking customers can conduct their banking, including taking out and depositing cash, at over 11,500 Post Office branches nationwide. The Post Office, as several hon. Members have mentioned, has a duty to serve rural communities, with the Department for Business and Trade requiring that 95% of the total rural population across the UK be within three miles of a Post Office. Therefore, where communities might be too small for a banking hub, as may be the case for some of the rural communities we are focusing on this evening, individuals and businesses can still access essential services at their local Post Office.

**Helen Morgan:** Have the people who have developed these regulations considered that three miles is a very long way for those who do not drive or have access to a car, or where there is no bus service? That is certainly the case for large numbers of people in North Shropshire and, I am sure, the other rural communities mentioned during the debate. People have set up their lives to be able to access the services that are available, but if those services are taken away and put somewhere else, they are unlikely to be able to get to that location, which is really problematic. Will the Minister consider reassessing the criteria, so that banking hubs are placed where banks were previously located so that people can still access them?

**James Murray:** The hon. Member is correct that people need to be able to get to banking hubs, and I will address that point later in my speech.

More broadly, this Government are committed to improving the quality of life for people living and working in rural areas, so that rural communities and businesses can realise their full potential. A prosperous rural economy will be underpinned by improvements in rural connectivity, as the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) pointed out, and access to a diverse range of services. In the autumn Budget of 2024, the Government therefore announced funding of over £500 million next year to deliver digital infrastructure upgrades through Project Gigabit and the shared rural network. That investment will drive roll-out of broadband and 4G connectivity to support access to good internet in rural areas across the UK.

We have also confirmed investment of over £1 billion to support and improve bus services and keep fares affordable. In recognition of the fact that each community has individual needs, we have introduced the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill to put power over local bus services back in the hands of local leaders. Every region in England, including the rural communities at the heart of this debate, will benefit. Taken together, these investments will help improve access to banking services, whether

digital or in-person. More broadly, they will help to deliver economic growth more evenly across the country, helping rural areas to thrive.

In closing, on behalf of the Economic Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Emma Reynolds), I again thank the hon. Member for North Dorset for his continued work in highlighting this important topic. I assure him and other hon. Members

that this Government are steadfast in their commitment to supporting rural communities in their access to banking services, and I thank him again for raising his constituents' concerns in the House tonight.

*Question put and agreed to.*

9.38 pm

*House adjourned.*





# Westminster Hall

Monday 24 February 2025

[GRAHAM STRINGER *in the Chair*]

## Social Media Use: Minimum Age

4.30 pm

**Tony Vaughan** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 700086 relating to a minimum age for social media.

It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. The House is considering whether social media should be banned for children under the age of 16. I start by thanking Kim Campbell, who is in the Public Gallery, for submitting this petition, which has gained over 130,000 signatures. Kim believes that the answer to the question posed is yes. When I asked my two boys, aged 14 and 10, whether social media should be banned for children, their answer was predictable: [HON. MEMBERS: “No!”] No—of course. But when we ask the same question of UK adults, the overwhelming majority respond: [HON. MEMBERS: “Yes.”] Yes—75% of them, in fact, according to a poll published last month and based on a survey of 2,000 adults, I think. On the same theme, I asked my constituents in Folkestone and Hythe last week whether smartphones should be banned in schools. Almost 2,000 responded and, again, 75% thought that they should—I must say that many of the 24% who thought that they should not looked to me as though they were still at school themselves.

Are adults imagining a problem here? Do we just not understand our young people? I have heard it said more than once that most adults do not see how important social media is to young people’s social and digital identity and that we cannot teach boundaries if we ban access to these apps altogether. I totally agree that social media can be a space where young people can build positive relationships with their peers, reduce loneliness, improve coping skills and improve general knowledge and creativity—social media can of course be a wonderful tool, but it is currently a wild west where there is too much harmful content.

**Naushabah Khan** (Gillingham and Rainham) (Lab): Does my hon. and learned Friend agree, given where we are with social media today, that legislation just has not kept up with the pace of change? We are far behind in being able to deal with and tackle this issue, given how extensive social media usage is. Our pace of change, in terms of legislation, just has not met that demand.

**Tony Vaughan:** My hon. Friend raises an interesting point. The legislative regime that we have at the moment, as I will come on to say, will require risk assessments. The state of the evidence when the Online Safety Act 2023 was being passed is different from the evidence that we have today, so the nature of those assessments and of the risks is necessarily different. As I will come on to say, we need to look at that on a continual basis.

As I was saying, social media can be a wonderful tool, but it has become a wild west where too much harmful content is being pushed on to young people, and social media companies are simply not doing enough

to tackle it. The sad fact of the matter is that social media is pushing content that radicalises, that catalyses mental health crises and that is highly addictive. The head of MI5, Ken McCallum, last month raised the alarm about how extremist ideologies are reaching children as young as 12 through social media platforms, and young people radicalised by social media are on its books. That, of course, is a growing threat to national security.

Another issue is mental health crises. We are seeing skyrocketing rates of anxiety, depression, eating disorders and even suicide among adolescents.

**Luke Murphy** (Basingstoke) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. and learned Friend on an excellent speech. On that point, students from Brighton Hill community school in my constituency recently raised the issue of the significant impact that social media was having on their mental health and wellbeing. Does he agree that it is not just adults who are concerned, but young people, and that they should be involved in the review of legislation, because it is they who are seeing the most detrimental impact on their health and wellbeing?

**Tony Vaughan:** I completely agree with my hon. Friend, and I congratulate the children in his constituency on taking a very sensible approach. It is interesting that children themselves are coming forward and saying that—perhaps because they see the harms that I am talking about and want to do something about them. We have seen cases where children as young as 14 have taken their own lives after being bullied or exposed to harmful online content. During preparation for this debate, I was informed by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children that there is an online website posing as a community that encourages suicide. That is the dark and depressing side of the online world that we have to do more to tackle.

What about addiction? Social media platforms are designed to exploit vulnerabilities in our young people. Algorithms push harmful content—body image issues, self-harm or anxiety videos—directly on to their feeds. A recent survey showed that on TikTok the algorithm was 4,343% more likely to show toxic eating disorder content to users who were already vulnerable to such issues. Many Members will have seen the Channel 4 documentary “Swiped”, where a secondary school took the phones of year 8 pupils for 12 weeks to see what would happen. The results were impressive: children talked to their friends more, reported less anxiety and were more focused in class.

**Maya Ellis** (Ribble Valley) (Lab): Given that 70% of youth services investment has been slashed since 2010, does my hon. and learned Friend agree that we need to provide opportunities, aside from school, where children can interact before taking away one of the few places that they have to spend time with their peers?

**Tony Vaughan:** My hon. Friend raises a really important point. This cannot be about shutting down avenues for young people to socialise with each other. Whatever action is taken to make it harder for young people to access social media, we have to make sure that other things are going on in society so that they do not feel that that is the only place they can go to socialise.

[Tony Vaughan]

The petitioners' view, as I said, is that we should ban access to social media until children are 16. I spoke to the NSPCC before this debate; its position is that it does not think an outright ban is the answer. Without changing the software or the devices, a ban on children using social media—without doing more—would be unenforceable. The NSPCC's view is that a ban would push children into unregulated and more dangerous online spaces.

Does the Online Safety Act do enough? Several people I spoke to in preparing for this debate think that it does. For example, there is a requirement for social media companies to conduct children's access assessments to determine whether children are likely to access their platform. There are online age assurance measures that require social media companies to assess whether their services are likely to be accessed by children and to adopt robust methods such as photo ID matching, facial age estimation and mobile network checks.

Age assurance measures are of course right, but groups such as Smartphone Free Childhood do not believe that risk assessments, and the Online Safety Act more broadly, go far enough. They do not advocate for an approach of risk assessment and risk reduction methods; rather, they say that the onus should be on the social media companies to demonstrate that their apps are safe for children to use and that, if they cannot, their app must not be used by children. That seems to be the opposite of putting the onus on the regulator to prove that an app is dangerous or harmful. It might well be that that would be something the code of practice under the Online Safety Act could do. It would require tightening that code of practice, so it would be useful to know whether the Minister agrees that the Act would be capable of reversing that burden, and that we ought to think about those methods.

**Alison Bennett** (Mid Sussex) (LD): Does the hon. and learned Gentleman agree that, while legislation can go so far, we have a broader responsibility as adults in society and as parents—myself included—to make sure that we monitor not only what our children are using and how they use it, but our own habits? A headteacher in my constituency was alarmed that she had to write to parents to tell them that when they collect their infants from the playground, they should put their phones away and have eye contact and engage with their children.

**Tony Vaughan:** The hon. Lady makes a common-sense point: if we are going to advocate for change, we have to lead by example. It might be said that the harms we are talking about are a somewhat separate issue to that. Of course we need to take responsibility, but where we have social media companies that are pushing content that is objectively dangerous, we need to have the conversation that we are having today about how the system and social media companies should be forced to ensure that that space is a safe one.

**Alistair Strathern** (Hitchin) (Lab): I thank the parents who have brought forward this petition—they are often way ahead of us as legislators when it comes to issues affecting children's safety. My hon. and learned Friend is doing a very good job of setting out some possible risks that the Online Safety Act will not fully be able to mitigate some of the challenges that we are seeing.

Considering robust measures on the age of access to social media is timely and important in thinking about the best way of protecting young people from possible exposure to online harm. On top of that, though, we must recognise that some exposure is always likely to be there. Would he also agree that it is important to ensure that we think how, through the curriculum review, we can best empower and set up children, young people and their parents to protect themselves from harm where they are exposed to it, even with the stronger regulations that we are looking to put in place?

**Tony Vaughan:** I completely agree with my hon. Friend. We will not protect children through just Government or social media while expecting parents to do nothing. Of course, we parents will have to do our part. Interestingly, on that point, I was going to say that an important potential measure is the approach put forward by my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) in his private Member's Bill, the Protection of Children (Digital Safety and Data Protection) Bill. His concept, which I hope to hear more about in the course of this debate, is about raising the age of data consent from 13 to 16, which essentially stops the social media companies being able to harvest data and keep feeding the kind of content that will be harmful. That seems to me a no-brainer.

Very briefly, I want to talk about smartphones in school, an issue closely connected to the one posed by the petitioner. Many teachers and parents who I have talked to believe that this “never seen, never heard” guidance, which was introduced by the previous Government, is not working. We have students still using phones during break time and often during lessons, and the problems that that causes are significant. I have had many teachers say to me, “This takes up so much time—it is a huge distraction and it interferes with learning.”

**Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): Prior to entering Parliament, I worked for the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation, a type 1 diabetes charity, and one of the issues that came to light when this measure was previously proposed by the Government was the fact that children who might need to use their phones to monitor their type 1 diabetes, or who have parent carer's responsibilities, need to have an exemption. That creates a stigma between children who might have a medical requirement to use their mobile device and those who do not. How would the hon. and learned Gentleman see this measure interacting with that?

**Tony Vaughan:** Every school has to comply with the Equality Act 2010. Whatever policy a school puts in place, one would have to check that what they are doing complies with the law. Those sorts of exceptions would obviously have to be looked at very carefully.

We do not have to look far to see examples of local areas that have banned smartphones in schools, such as the London borough of Barnet.

**Dan Tomlinson** (Chipping Barnet) (Lab): I thank my hon. and learned Friend for mentioning the action that has taken place in the London borough of Barnet, for which I have the honour of being one of the three Members of Parliament. I have been working closely with local teachers in primary schools and secondary

schools and with the fantastic Smartphone Free Childhood campaign in north London, led by a wonderful volunteer called Nova. We now have 103 primary schools in the borough committed to going smartphone free from September. Every secondary school has also said that they will go from year 7 or upwards—with some going further and faster—to go smartphone free. That is not just “not seen, not heard”, but headteachers working together, so that they have safety in numbers and are backed up by their MPs, to say that, unless there are specific exemptions that apply, smartphones will not even be allowed on the premises.

Further to an earlier point, it has also been really encouraging that some teachers are going further and saying that parents should also not be allowed to use smartphones on the grounds, for the reasons that have been pointed out. I thank my hon. and learned Friend for raising Barnet. It has been fantastic to work with the campaign locally to support parents and young children in my constituency.

**Tony Vaughan:** I congratulate my hon. Friend on his activism and organising on this issue. I know that he has played a big role in the outcomes that he has just described.

An example more local to my Folkestone and Hythe constituency is a policy designed by the John Wallis academy in Ashford in Kent, where students put their mobile phones in a locked pouch during the day. The principal, Mr McBeath, had intended that the rule would limit disruption in school and support safeguarding. I, for one, will be advocating for that whenever I speak to headteachers in Folkestone and Hythe. I commend the work being done by Smartphone Free Childhood nationally and by its group in Folkestone and Hythe. It is important to work closely with everyone involved to address the problems that social media use is creating for our young people.

I am conscious of all the other people who want to speak as well as the Minister, but I have a few questions for him, one of which I have raised already. Is the code of practice likely to be robust enough in the coming years, as we see more evidence of the harms caused by social media? What changes may be needed as time goes by? Is Ofcom striking the right balance between safeguarding children from harm and ensuring economic proportionality? Is there anything that Ofcom is doing or can do to tackle the small but high-risk sites I mentioned earlier, which act as online communities and encourage things like suicide? Last, what measures can the Government take to get ahead of AI development to ensure that children can be effectively protected from the risks posed by AI so that our politics can forge technical progress? That is enough from me. I look forward to hearing others' contributions.

**Several hon. Members** *rose—*

**Graham Stringer (in the Chair):** Order. I remind Members that, even if they have put in to speak, they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate. The debate is well subscribed, so I ask hon. Members to stick to about six minutes. I will not impose a time limit now, but that should enable everybody to speak. Finally, Mr Speaker has made it clear that if people are called to speak, they should be here for the wind-ups, as in the Chamber.

4.47 pm

**Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer, and to be here today to support the petition calling for social media companies to be banned from allowing children under the age of 16 to create social media accounts. I stand here today in complete agreement with the over 700 Reigate constituents who signed the petition urging us to take action on this important issue.

As a mother of three, I spend much time worrying about the impact of social media and screen time on my children and their peers. When I was growing up, in the school holidays I was out playing with my friends, climbing trees, building camps and learning the critical social skills that we all need in adulthood. Now, instead, we do not let our children out, and the only world we allow them to explore is a fantasy one that is rife with risk and does not equip them with the life skills that they need.

When children are online, they can interact with predatory individuals without realising, see unrealistic body images that batter their self-esteem and be convinced that black is white by false information. That is extremely damaging. Many adults fall for those things, so how on earth do we expect our children not to? It is no coincidence that we see a mental health crisis in our young people at the same time as mass adoption of smartphones and access to social media. Yes, increased mental health support is needed, but the best remedy is to remove the root cause.

I note that the previous Conservative Government took some welcome first steps in the fight to safeguard our children through the introduction of the Online Safety Act. Thanks to that Act, providers must be proactive in removing illegal content such as child sexual abuse material, and they must protect children and young people from content that is harmful. That could include harassment, abuse, bullying or content about suicide, self-harm and eating disorders. The Act also includes welcome measures to prevent children from accessing online pornography, something I particularly welcome in the light of the huge damage that material does to both our girls and our boys.

While the Online Safety Act is a welcome starting point, we must go further. That is overwhelmingly the view of Brits, 75% of whom now back raising the minimum age for creating a social media account from 13 to 16, as a recent More in Common survey shows. If, as I hope, we raise the minimum age to 16, more thought needs to be given to enforcement. While platforms may set a minimum age requirement, with 13 being the standard for most social media sites, those limits are easy to circumvent. If teenagers can evade the ban by using a simple virtual private network, we will not get the full benefit of raising the age limit. It will be of great value to hear more today about the best ways to overcome this challenge.

I also want to touch quickly on smartphones, as this is another route to better safeguarding and protecting our children. The hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) made some really powerful points on this. I strongly support a ban on smartphones in schools for children under 16. When asked, 42% of older teenagers say that on a typical day their smartphone distracts them from schoolwork, and nearly half say social media has distracted them enough to affect their grades. Currently, only 11% of schools are genuinely



[Rebecca Paul]

smartphone free, and children at these schools get GCSE results one to two grades higher, so there is clearly a big upside to banning smartphones in schools.

The Conservatives recently tabled an amendment to Labour's Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill to do exactly that. Unfortunately it was voted down, but I urge the Labour Government to seriously consider implementing this much needed restriction in some form. To be honest, I am perplexed as to why they rejected the amendment, when this one measure would be a game changer in terms of protecting children and improving educational outcomes, which is the whole purpose of the Bill. I hope that they will reconsider the amendment at a later stage.

**Mike Reader** (Northampton South) (Lab): I am very grateful that one of my constituents who has campaigned hard for a smartphone ban is here today. Does the hon. Lady recognise that although we can ban phones in schools, as the majority of schools have, it will not prevent kids from bringing phones to school and playing with them when they get outside the school gates? It is a much bigger challenge than just banning phones within the school boundary.

**Rebecca Paul:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point. It is a tricky and difficult thing to achieve, but a ban it makes it a little easier for schools. We have implemented guidance, but it has not cut through as much as we wanted. We now need to accept that we need to go further and introduce a ban, because it is much easier for schools to take action when it is on a statutory footing.

I thank the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) for his great work on safer phones for our children. I hope to be able to support his private Member's Bill on 7 March. These are exactly the type of initiatives that we should be working on together on a cross-party basis, because we all agree that we want to protect our children.

I encourage Ministers and the Government as a whole to engage fully with the excellent points made in this debate, and act swiftly to protect our children from an increasingly insidious online realm that they are simply not equipped to navigate. I hope the Minister will give serious consideration to raising the minimum age for social media use to 16 and banning smartphones in schools. The value from these two changes alone would be huge for our society, and we would all thank the Government for it.

4.53 pm

**Lola McEvoy** (Darlington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) and the petitioner for bringing this vital debate.

Since being elected to this place in July, I have spoken about children's safety online several times, including in this Chamber. For too long, our children's development and protecting them from harm from predators, inappropriate and disturbing content and from each other, have been treated as an afterthought. As legislators, it falls to us to protect our children, but we are way behind where we need to be.

In my constituency of Darlington, this issue came up time and again on the campaign trail as parents, siblings and grandparents all reported feeling ill equipped to fulfil their most important role of giving their children a safe and healthy childhood. It is vital we understand that parents are asking for our support now, because for many of them, the fight and pressure from their own children to allow them the latest phone, more screen time, or access to an adult version of a game and much more, feels relentless.

This debate is about social media, but it is also about the digital age of consent. My view is that children under 16 should not be given the responsibility to permit or to deny companies' access to their data. The risks are too high, and the long-awaited children's codes from Ofcom are not yet in place; we do not know what impact the measures in the Online Safety Act will have on children's behaviour and experience online. We should, therefore, stipulate that 16 is the age of digital consent.

Last week I visited Firthmoor primary school in Darlington for an assembly on online safety. It was exceptional; the children had songs, raps, roleplay and helpful tips for staying safe online. These children, aged between four and 11, are online already. I was struck by their understanding of passive screen time versus active screen time. Passive screen time includes scrolling aimlessly through suggested content, and active screen time is about learning. These children are trying to protect themselves, but it cannot just be left to them. I do not think that we can ban children from accessing screens, but we must safeguard them from harm until they are old enough to navigate the risks themselves.

**Mr James Frith** (Bury North) (Lab): My wife and I regret ever getting a smartphone for our two eldest children. We have four, and we are wondering what to do when the third expects access to the same rights. Smartphone management is something we continually get wrong. My hon. Friend has talked about screen time. It cannot be beyond the wit of our smartphone creators to give parental controls better intuitive use, so that they cannot be undermined so easily by the smart children using the smartphones. Does she agree that while we need to strengthen the role of Ofcom in rooting out the toxic content that our children are pushed towards, the smartphone manufacturers also have a job to empower parents? It is a real concern, because children's use of smartphones and their access to social media is a daily battle for their parents.

**Lola McEvoy:** I fully support what my hon. Friend says. Lots of parents in Darlington have said that although the default setting may be that children cannot access chat rooms on games or a more violent version of a game—because it is not just the phones and devices, but what they are accessing on those devices that really matters—they just lose the battle. When it comes to the crunch and their child is arguing that they want to go on the device and they are going to have a tantrum, they just allow them to go on it. Parents need more support from us as legislators, which is basically my point.

Children should be able to enjoy games and access safe and engaging educational content. Platforms should not be allowed to target them with suggested content. That is where the problems are coming in—with suggested content, children are exposed to harmful and unhealthy

things. Platforms should have children-safe search engines, and features including live location and chat rooms should be designed to be transparent and child-friendly, with their safety at their heart. Accessing certain social media features, such as chatting with adults who they do not know or sharing content, should be solely for those who have been strictly age-verified as over 16.

**Max Wilkinson** (Cheltenham) (LD): I thank the hon. Lady for her work with my constituent, Ellen Roome, on issues to do with children and social media. As a Liberal, I am instinctively against banning things. However, liberal society has long tolerated minimum age limits for things that might be dangerous for children, such as cigarettes, alcohol or driving. Does she agree that we should consider social media use in the same light?

**Lola McEvoy:** That is absolutely right; I am grateful to the hon. Member for his intervention. It is important that we strike the right balance. For a long time, we have been behind on protecting children online. It is time now to use the Online Safety Act 2023 and the upcoming children's codes to get it right the first time. We do not know how they will bed in, and it is crucial that we get it absolutely right with the first iterations of the children's codes in April.

To be able to chat with strangers or have content suggested to them, a person should be age-verified as over 16. For me, the online world is a hugely valuable part of modern life. As with everything we do offline, we must ensure that it is safe and regulated for children to use, and if it is not, we should not let them use it.

In Darlington, I have set up an online safety forum with year 10s across every secondary school in the town. Their biggest concern is the disturbing content that the Online Safety Act and children's codes should protect against, but they have also flagged to me awful, horrible examples of peer-to-peer bullying, which is totally acceptable on social media platforms and goes unchecked. Ofcom is required to issue new codes every three years, so if the first codes do not get it right in April, we could be waiting for three years for a 13-year-old to be protected properly, by which point they will be 16 anyway.

The age to use social media in its current form, where platforms can suggest content and children can chat unchecked with strangers, should clearly be 16. Those whose age is not verified should be able only to access child-safe, limited platforms designed for children. That is common sense. I am concerned that without further legislation, platforms will be left to implement their own safeguards. In some cases, those may well be good, but our job is not to leave the protection of children online to chance. We should stipulate an age, require ID and be bold leaders in this space. Our children will look back and ask us what we were waiting for.

5 pm

**Damian Hinds** (East Hampshire) (Con): I thank Kim Campbell and the petitioners, including almost 400 from East Hampshire, for bringing this debate to Parliament. There has been a lot of interest of late in Australia's upcoming ban on social media for under-16s, and I was interested in how the Australians are going to implement it, considering some of the complexities and definitional difficulties. I recommend to colleagues a

very good interview on American National Public Radio with Australia's eSafety Commissioner, in which she said that it is not about flicking some big switch. She said that there was a possibility that some social media functionality could be removed, rather than an entire app being blocked; that

"messaging and gaming sites and anything that delivers education or health care information"

would be exempt; and that, ultimately, it would be for the Minister for Communications to

"decide which platforms are in and which are out."

Well, I hope they have invested in their legal defence budgets.

It is true that parents vary widely in what they think is good or acceptable. Everybody agrees that their child should be able to call or text home to let mum or dad know that they are delayed or feeling worried, or that their club has been cancelled. Some also value things that can be done only on a smartphone—such as using a map to find the way home—and there is a whole other debate about education technology and the use of Show My Homework and all the rest of it. Some parents are totally happy with the entirety of the electronic world—smartphones and social media. Let us be honest: it is parents who often help children get around the minimum age limit to be on these platforms. Sometimes, we say that they do that only for fear of the child missing out, and that may be true, but we do not know that it is in the majority of cases.

In addressing these questions as legislators, we often fall back on saying, "Hang on, we're not talking about banning all phones; we're talking specifically about smartphones. And we're not talking about getting rid of the good stuff; we're only talking about getting rid of the bad stuff." This, of course, is the easy stage in the legislative process, and things become much harder later, when we have to define precisely what we mean. I am about to recommit that sin: I am going to talk about an ill-defined "it" that we may in some way want to restrict. That "it" is something about smartphones and social media that I will today fail to define, but I hope to come back at the end to say a little about more precisely what I mean.

I am not in the business of trying to put new restrictions on how parents manage their families or of trying to do things to them that they could do for themselves. There is already a minimum age for using social media; it just happens to be an arbitrary age that is based on some legislation—not even from this country—from the 1990s. When the GDPR came in through the European Union, which we were in then, countries could choose an age anywhere between 13 and 16. Different countries chose different ages; we happen to have settled on 13. Most people would say that we have to set the bar somewhere, so the question becomes, where? Of course, we could, alternatively, say that the Government or a regulator have no role in setting an age at all. However, if that is not our view, and we accept that there should be an age, we have to ask the secondary question: what should it be? There is no ancient right to be on TikTok at age 13. These are novel technologies, and we are facing these questions now for the first time.

In this country, there are two main thresholds for the transition from childhood to adulthood, and they are 16 and 18. Those are not the only ones, but they are

[*Damian Hinds*]

the main ones. In English law, there has never been a concept of an age of digital consent and nor, to my knowledge, was there a non-digital concept of consent in contract law previously for somebody under the age of majority. I grant that it is arguable, but it seems that 16 is the most appropriate threshold.

**Siân Berry** (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): I have met parents from Smartphone Free Childhood, but also young people. This is a big issue in Brighton Pavilion. Has the right hon. Member thought about pushing for the Minister and Members to talk more with young people about where the age limit should lie, rather than trying to come up with a number in the middle of a debate? It is clear from talking to young people that they feel that parts of social media are very toxic, but I also think they are best placed to judge where the limit should lie.

**Damian Hinds:** To be fair to the Minister and previous Ministers, I think they do make efforts to hear from young people. An interesting survey by the Youth Endowment Fund, which I commend to the hon. Lady and others, put an extreme proposition to 13 to 17-year-olds: “If you could turn off social media forever for you and everybody else, would you do it?” While a majority did not say yes to that extreme proposition, something like a third did. We also have various other surveys.

It is true that when we talk to children, as I am sure many colleagues have done in schools across their constituencies, we get a variety of views. In particular, children do not want to be left out, and as parents we do not want that for our children either. If everybody else is in a certain group or has a certain means of communication, we tend to want our children to have that too.

The evidence is not perfect. There is even evidence that some screen time is a positive good. A programme for international student assessment study in 2019 talked about a Goldilocks effect, where about an hour of screen time was beneficial for mental wellbeing, after which the benefit declined. That same study found wide differences in life satisfaction between what it called “extreme internet users” and others. There are now plenty of other studies on everything from happiness, the quality of relationships and eyesight to the effect on sleep and concentration.

There is also the rising incidence of mental ill health among teenagers, which—for the avoidance of doubt and to take politics out of it—is not unique to this country and not uniquely a post-covid effect. Causality is still hard to prove, but it seems extraordinary that, when we are talking about children, we allow something to happen because we cannot prove 100% that it causes harm, rather than allowing it to happen only if we can prove that it is safe. That is not the way we deal, for example, with children’s food or toys. I would turn the question around: are people really suggesting that the prevalence of self-harm is nothing to do with the prevalence and normalisation of certain imagery on social media?

The Online Safety Act was a landmark piece of legislation, and we will debate it again in Westminster Hall on Wednesday. Everybody who worked on it—including myself—was always clear that it would not be

the last time we had to come back to this subject in legislation. It is inevitable that there will be further regulation and restrictions in the interests of greater child protection. I therefore urge the Government to move from working out whether there will be further protections to working out what those will be. Of course, to write legislation—to return to where I started—one needs to be able to define things precisely and, in reality, there is no bright line between a smartphone and a brick phone, and no slam-dunk definition of social media either.

It can be instructive to think about individual platforms and services. One of the things we worry about is TikTok. Do we worry about Snapchat? Yes, we probably do, because of the association with bullying and the disappearing messages. But some families like the snap friends function, because they can see where different family members are. Do we worry about Instagram? Yes, we probably do, and it has a particular association with issues around body image. But it is also a way for people to share lovely family photos, and for extended families to keep in touch.

A lot of families allow children to have WhatsApp, when they would not allow them to have TikTok, and up until quite recently, some would not even have called it a social media platform. Where we think we have problems with disinformation on TikTok and Facebook, other countries have them with WhatsApp. What about YouTube? For many people, YouTube is not social media; it is a place where they go to watch videos or for music. But because it has user-generated content, it is also social media; it is certainly capable of sucking up a lot of young people’s time, and it has potential rabbit holes that people can fall down.

What about gaming? Gaming is different from social media, but modern gaming also has quite a lot of social media-like functions, such as lists of friends. Certainly, it is a way of trying to create communities of people with common interests. It is also often linked to the use of Discord or to streaming on Twitch. And, again, it certainly takes up a lot of time—unless, of course, someone is in China, where the Government will allow them to do it for only one hour a day, on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays.

All of the above have risks attached, and they all have negatives, but we are unlikely to say that we want to ban them all—far from it. There is also a different risk: if we take one thing and ban it based on its specific features—its specific definition—we just push people to other places. Other things will then get more social-media characteristics, and children may end up in darker places on the internet. All of that is probably why the Australians ended up where they did: saying that it is probably more about specific functionality and that, at the end, it might be about having to make case-by-case judgments.

We worry about content; unwanted, inappropriate contact, as others have said; the excessive time children spend on platforms; potential addiction; the effects on sleep and concentration; and myopia. Crucially—my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) covered this very well—these technologies can also crowd out other things. Whether they, in and of themselves, are good or bad, there are only 24 hours in a day, and we want children, in the time they are not at school and not asleep, to be able to access the full range of things that childhood should be all about.



**Graham Stringer (in the Chair):** Order—

**Damian Hinds:** I know I am going on for way too long, Mr Stringer.

**Graham Stringer (in the Chair):** There is no defined time limit at the moment, but I did suggest that people take about six minutes. I presume that the right hon. Gentleman is bringing his remarks to a conclusion.

**Damian Hinds:** I confessed myself a sinner at the start, Mr Stringer, and I will now come to a close.

In the Online Safety Act, we covered a lot regarding content and contact, but we need to do more on the issues of time and addiction, and I am pleased to see some of that in the work of the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister). In the meantime, as others have said, we also need to do more on parental controls. I would like to see NHS advice to parents, which can be very powerful, on what an appropriate amount of time would be for children. We also need to enforce the existing age limits, particularly the one at age 13, and to recognise that some people who falsely proved they were 13 when they were eight, nine or 10 are now showing up on social media lists as being over 18, when, in fact, they are still in their much earlier teens.

5.12 pm

**Josh MacAlister (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. The debate so far has done a really good job of summarising lots of the reasons why I chose to bring forward a private Member's Bill earlier last year to address some of the issues relating to the addictive features of smartphones and social media, such as the impacts on sleep, mental health and educational attainment. There are also increasing concerns about conspiracy theories and their ability to spread, particularly among young children.

Today, I will focus specifically on the evidence, because I think that that is where the political debate is moving and where there seems to be the greatest disagreement—particularly on whether we have enough evidence now to act with confidence or whether we should pause and wait for further evidence.

There are three ways I think about this issue. The first is that, in 2012, something happened not just here, but around the western world and beyond, and it was specifically to do with teenage mental health and levels of anxiety and depression among our young people. That global event coincided with the rise in access to smartphones and social media and high-speed internet. There is no other plausible hypothesis that I have heard or come across—I would welcome interventions from colleagues here today—to explain that global phenomenon; there is no coherent alternative hypothesis. So when we think about the evidence that we require to act in this country, we should think carefully about whether we are looking at developed, different hypotheses for why this problem has grown.

The second element is the precautionary principle, which links to another point that was made. The tech industry in particular is very effective at casting doubt over findings from studies. Over the years, the burden of proof and of evidence has fallen on those like the many

Members present and the petitioners. It has been for them to establish beyond reasonable doubt that there is a causal link between the use of smartphones and social media and the harms that it may cause. It is important in this debate, and in others, to balance where that evidence should be brought from. Surely we should place a burden of proof on those rolling out technology and platforms that are gobbling up huge amounts of children's and young people's time. At a fairly conservative estimate, the average 12-year-old is spending the equivalent of a part-time job every week on their smartphone. That must have some effect on how they might otherwise have used their time, the development of their brains, and their relationships with other people while they are on those platforms.

**Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab):** I thank my hon. Friend for his private Member's Bill, which I wholeheartedly support. On the subject of evidence, pilots are increasingly being undertaken, such as the one in the "Swiped" documentary that was referenced earlier. I met 70 parents at All Saints Catholic college in my constituency two weeks ago to discuss this topic, and they have seen, from the school's own evidence base, the impact of a much stricter smartphone policy. We are starting to see both the evidence of the harms, as my hon. Friend talked about, and interesting pilots that show the improvements that could be achieved by measures such as the internet age of consent and a stronger policy in schools.

**Josh MacAlister:** I thank my hon. Friend for his work on this issue in his constituency. He is absolutely right. Micro-experiments and anecdotal feedback from members of the public, who have signed this petition in large numbers, show that parents are really worried that something is going on here, but it will take some time to gather the evidence. The second aspect is about where the burden of proof should lie. Applying the burden of proof in one direction only—to those advocating for tighter regulation—is not balanced. It should apply both ways.

The third point about evidence relates to the absence of causal studies. They will take many years, so what do we do, in their absence, with the weight of correlational evidence before us? This is where we must look at the work of Sir Austin Bradford Hill. The Bradford Hill criteria, which were named after him in the 1960s, were based on the epidemiologist's work to try to fill in the evidence gap for policymakers when the debate was being had about the public health impacts of smoking. The tobacco industry did a very effective job of casting doubt over whether smoking itself caused cancer or, as the industry then said, it simply brought cancer out earlier—that cancer was inherent within people. That was the argument: the industry said that there was no correlational study to prove that that was not the case, which goes back to my burden of proof argument.

We need to fill in the gap, because we will not have causal studies for many years. Petitions like this will continue to come, the debate will carry on raging, and politicians will be pulled towards this problem until we find a way of solving it. In the absence of those correlational studies, we have to find a way of applying a framework to look at the existing causal studies. I will not go through all nine of the Bradford Hill criteria, but one of

[Josh MacAlister]

them is dose-response rate: does the dose of a certain factor relate to the degree of the impact? In 2019, the UK millennium cohort study found that

“social media use is associated with mental health in young people”,

and greater use means greater impact. A 2022 dose-response meta-analysis found that more time spent on social media was “significantly associated” with depression. There are stacks of studies out there that show the correlation between time spent and impact. When one works through the nine criteria, in the absence of a causal study or series of causal studies, the evidence points in a clear direction: we need tighter regulation that can empower parents to set boundaries and the collective rules for how our children use smartphones and social media.

There is a risk, at times, that the sides to this debate are characterised as pro- or anti-tech. My final reflection is that, for the UK to be the global sandbox and incubator of great tech development that it should be, we need good, intuitive shared rules that can garner high degrees of public consent and support. If we move quickly on this issue, and do it smart, as a country, we will get benefits not only for economic growth and the tech industry, but for our children and their future.

5.21 pm

**Dr Danny Chambers** (Winchester) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) for securing this debate. It was good to briefly chat to Kim Campbell outside the Chamber. She has done a great job in getting this petition debated. This issue is something that thousands of parents around the country are agonising over.

We live in an era when social media connects us instantly, but that often comes at quite a cost. As the Lib Dem spokesperson for mental health, I knock on a lot of doors and speak to a lot of parents, headteachers and teachers. At the moment, one of the top issues that is brought up, often unprompted, is people’s struggle to get access to treatment for their children’s mental health. Nearly everyone seems to agree, throughout society, in whatever area, that children’s mental health issues are increasing in incidence. Everyone is reporting an increase in anxiety, depression and body image issues, as the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) mentioned. All those things are on the rise, and many people believe that that is fuelled by platforms designed to capture and keep children’s attention at any cost.

The risk goes far beyond self-esteem: social media is an open door for strangers to make contact with vulnerable children. Grooming, exploitation and harmful content are just a few clicks away. As several Members have mentioned, parents, despite their best efforts, struggle to keep up with the rapidly evolving digital landscape. We know that children are often much quicker, more adaptable, and quick to circumvent any safeguards with workarounds. They can quickly access restricted content and bypass age limits with ease. We also know that once one child in a cohort has managed to get hold of that content, they can send it to other children quickly and

easily. That is why, along with nearly everyone present, we support reviewing the minimum age for social media access.

We are in an environment where online bullying is relentless and inescapable. Bullying has always taken place in schools, but people went home. Now, when a child gets home, though they might be in bed or having dinner, the bullying can continue. They might even wake up in the morning to bullying that has come in overnight. We must ensure that restrictions are not just appropriate and evidence-based, as far as they can be, but properly enforced. There has been a lot of discussion about what age should be the minimum for social media access, but the age does not matter if the restriction is not enforced by anyone. At the moment there is a minimum age, and we know that people younger than that are accessing this content anyway. That is one reason why, as I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted (Victoria Collins) will speak about shortly, the Liberal Democrats are calling for more of a public health approach to children’s social media use.

I have just spent a month sitting on the Tobacco and Vapes Bill Committee, going line by line through that legislation, which is one of the most impactful pieces of public health legislation in decades. It will have a huge impact on public health by creating a smokefree generation. As a Government and as a society, we recognise that potentially harmful behaviours such as smoking and gambling need to be appropriately regulated. The hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) reminded everyone very eloquently about the supposed research that tobacco companies carried out for years to try to obfuscate the real situation. They pretended to add scientific value and knowledge, when it was really about trying to confuse the situation and slow any regulation of their products.

Just like the tobacco companies that prioritised profit over people’s health, social media companies will prioritise profit and engagement over young people’s mental health. Tech giants must be held accountable for the impact of their platforms on young minds. We need stronger protections, real enforcement of age limits, and proper digital education—not just for young people but for parents and teachers. All children will have to receive education in online safety and safer screen use to ensure that they are equipped with the skills to safely navigate the digital world, because when they finally hit whatever age is deemed appropriate, they need to be prepared and have the skills to engage critically, safely and responsibly with online content.

This is not about restricting freedom; it is about protecting young minds and improving the mental health of young people. We have allowed the digital world to move faster than our policies. Now we must act to keep up, because everyone agrees that our children deserve better.

5.26 pm

**Mike Reader** (Northampton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank the campaigners who brought this petition forward, and particularly my constituent, who I mentioned earlier, for her tenacious campaigning on this issue at regular surgery appointments and for sharing some fascinating research with me.

While I understand the concerns driving this debate, I do not believe that a blanket restriction set at an arbitrary age is necessarily the most effective way of protecting young people online. While I believe that we need to protect young people, and adults, from the harms of social media, I will set out why I do not believe that an age restriction change is necessarily the best course of action.

A huge proportion of our young people use social media daily for research, to connect with friends and to explore the world. We know that around 40% of kids under the age of 13 are already using social media platforms, which suggests to me that age restrictions alone have limitations in practice. It is worth noting that parental awareness of those age restrictions and requirements is mixed; while nine out of 10 parents of young kids have said that they are aware of the requirements, recent studies show that less than half can actually pinpoint that 13 is the age restriction for most sites. More concerning is that a third of parents with children below the current age restriction said that they would still allow their kids to use social media. That shows that a blanket restriction will not work, and that we need to bring parents and young people along with us if we are to make online spaces safer.

The figures are concerning because when we look at the impact of social media on young people, we see a complex picture. On the one hand, research suggests that over half of 12 to 15-year-olds have negative experiences online, and a magnitude of studies, as referenced by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan), have shown a link between heavy social media use and mental health concerns. Seven out of 10 young people admit that they have experienced cyber-bullying, with over a third reporting that it happens on a frequent basis. Some have described social media as much more addictive than cigarettes and alcohol, so clearly there are concerns.

On the other hand, 90% of young people said that using social media makes them feel happier and closer to their friends. During the pandemic, these platforms provided a crucial connection when face-to-face interaction was simply not possible. Social media has prompted a revolution in peer-to-peer interaction and sharing; we, as a Government, should not do anything to stifle that growth, and the grasp of creativity that our young people are showing. Social media offers our young people an opportunity to read, watch and understand the experiences of others around the world like they never have before.

The real question is not simply whether young people under the age of 16 should be able to use social media. As the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) recognised, social media is not just about TikTok and Snapchat; it is about all the different ways in which young people connect online—and even me, when I get time to jump on the PlayStation.

The real question is this: young people are using social media and are unlikely to stop using it even if we bring in a ban, so what can we do to make it safer? Social media companies, schools and parents all have a role to play in creating safer online environments for our young people. I believe that social media can do a lot more to moderate content and provide safer spaces for our young people. Harmful content that promotes self-harm, disordered eating, bullying and body image

issues should not be making it to online platforms. There has to be more accountability for the big tech giants.

Parents have to play a more active role in supervising and guiding their children's online activities. Research shows that only six in 10 parents are aware of the technical tools and social media controls available to them, and less than a third admit to actually using them to fully control how their kids use systems online.

**Monica Harding** (Esher and Walton) (LD): As a parent of four teenagers, I do battle on screen time every single day—so much so that my children actually thought I was coming into Parliament to give screen time to the nation. I think it is grossly unfair to blame parents or attribute responsibility to them when most parents are having this battle every single day. With the addictive algorithms on social media platforms, it is impossible for children to resist. I have a child who was 16 last week and is sitting his GCSEs. He is finding it very difficult to look away from his phone and concentrate on his studies because of these algorithms.

**Mike Reader:** I thank the hon. Member for her intervention. I am not saying that responsibility sits solely with parents, but parents definitely have a clear role to play. We cannot look solely to the state to help to raise our kids.

Teachers also have a big role to play. My mum, as a teacher, could tell us how important digital literacy is in this day and age. Children need the skills to navigate online spaces safely. Rather than focusing solely on age restrictions, we should consider how we make social media platforms safe for kids and improve their literacy so that they can connect with the world and explore the opportunities in front of them. Children should be aware of the risks that they face and should know how to report harmful content and navigate platforms safely. As the Government look at curriculum reform and at how we support our schools, teachers and parents, I hope that digital literacy will have an important place.

Social media is now fully embedded in young people's lives. It offers the opportunity to connect and provides for creative expression and learning. Our challenge is to maximise those benefits while minimising the risks, not to remove the opportunity altogether.

5.32 pm

**Jack Rankin** (Windsor) (Con): Mr Stringer, you would struggle to find a Member of this House who is more committed than I am to classical liberal ideas surrounding individual liberty and personal responsibility. I do wish there were more of us. However, when it comes to children, I very much agree with the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) that the Government's role is very different. Our job is to protect children and give them the skills they need to make decisions for themselves as they grow into adults. That does not mean molycoddling them or wrapping them in cotton wool: there is a clear difference between a bloody knee or a playground argument and exposure to graphic violence and pornography, which can be easily accessed on social media.

As many hon. Members have noted, anxiety levels in children are at an all-time high. In particular, suicide has increased dramatically: since 2012, the rates have doubled in boys and trebled in girls. According to the



[Jack Rankin]

“Good Childhood Report”, British children are now reporting some of the lowest happiness levels in Europe. In my constituency, a freedom of information request submitted to the royal borough of Windsor and Maidenhead found that mental health referrals in children had doubled since the pandemic.

The problems are due in large part to smartphones and social media. As was stated in a recent Select Committee session, the average 12-year-old now spends 21 hours a week on their phone. As well as the obvious direct harms, there are indirect consequences, which is the point that I believe the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) was making. Those are hours in which they are not having formative experiences or interacting with the world around them—experiences that our generation took for granted. I spent my early teens climbing trees and playing rugby, not staring at a screen. Something is being missed today in the healthy development of young people.

What sets social media apart is the ability to circumvent the traditional safeguards of parent, family and community, with children now exposed to the weight of the world in their bedroom. Feeling unable to protect their children from the ills of social media, many parents are resorting to banning phones entirely, which I do not think is sustainable. Things need to change. By changing the law to limit under-16s’ access to social media—I take the point from my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) that that is easier said than done—we can give parents and children a fighting chance.

I believe that changing the law will play a key role in reversing the fortunes of our children, but we also need to make sure that they are prepared for the challenges of modern life. As with many of the great initiatives that have been discussed today, change in Windsor has come from the bottom up. There is already a very active branch of Smartphone Free Childhood in my constituency, and parents have shared awful stories of hardcore pornography being circulated in primary school WhatsApp groups. Separately from the Smartphone Free Childhood campaign, there is a wider movement around children’s mental health.

In my constituency, the Well Windsor charity, which I emphasise is neutral on this particular proposition, is unique in what it does. I believe it could be the blueprint for change across the country. It was officially launched late last year by Andy Nuttall, along with seven other parents, who recognised that there was a gap in state services when it came to children’s mental health locally. It is more than a cluster of well-meaning adults; the charity is run by individuals with varied professional backgrounds, including former teachers, ex-CEOs, business leaders and clinical psychologists. They are proactive: they are raising funds, talking to schools and delivering already for students. The data that they have collected on mental health provision in schools in Windsor confirms what we already knew intuitively: parents and teachers feel underprepared for providing the necessary support when facing rising anxieties among children.

Well Windsor works with third parties such as myHappyMind to provide schools with programmes to help children to check in with themselves, practise mindfulness and improve their resilience, so that they can face the modern world head-on. The NHS, local

authorities and the Department for Education can often go round in circles, directing children and parents from one service to another, while children are left to fall by the wayside. Charities such as Well Windsor go directly to the schools that need help and deliver it—not in a month’s time or a year’s time, but within weeks of discussions first taking place.

Importantly, Well Windsor’s approach is non-invasive, with a focus on positivity, self-esteem and general mindfulness. We should be careful about raising awareness for the sake of it, because the last thing that suggestible children need is to be bombarded with information about depression, anxiety and mental health. That would be counterproductive. There can also be a tendency to medicate away mental health problems in children. That can sometimes come at the cost of addressing the root causes of those problems in the first place. One of them is clearly social media.

I believe that if we in this place can change the law for those in our communities who are taking matters into their own hands, we can help them to turn around some of the trends that we are seeing. The only thing limiting that is political will and time. I think most of us in this House, on a cross-party basis, would encourage the Minister to move in that direction. Communities across this country have had enough of the downward spiral in children’s mental health. Parents, teachers, children and charities such as Well Windsor are taking action. It is time that we in this place did the same.

5.38 pm

**Liam Conlon** (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. This issue has been raised by parents across Beckenham and Penge. More than 600 of my constituents have signed the recent petition, making Beckenham and Penge one of the top constituencies nationally for signatures. We have also had one of the largest sign-ups for the Smartphone Free Childhood campaign. That includes an active local group that I have been working with, which is led by Crispin Eccleston, Elizabeth Eastham and Raj Gandhi. Hundreds of people have emailed me. The issue has come up on the doorstep and has been raised through local schools and local groups such as the Scouts and Girl Guides, so I really welcome the opportunity to speak in today’s debate, and I thank my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) for securing it.

We know that a growing number of children use smartphones daily. Technological advancements are a fact of life and are here to stay. Smartphones and new media applications are a means of communication and come with many benefits. Before I became an MP, I worked in the tech sector for seven years, including as head of international operations for the global edtech firm Discovery Education, which teaches children coding and digital curriculum subjects. We want our children to be digitally native, confident in using technology and able to harness it for their own benefit. We also want them to be happy, healthy, safe and aware of and resilient to the risks of social media and the world online. We hope to find that balance in what is relatively new territory for all of us.

There is a growing body of concerning evidence about the amount of time that children and young people are spending online. A study published earlier

this month by the University of Birmingham found that 12 to 15-year-olds in the UK now spend an average of 35 hours a week on their smartphone. That is the equivalent of a full-time job, and all that time spent online is time not spent interacting with family and friends face to face, playing outside and building the social and emotional skills needed to form deep and meaningful relationships. It is also time when parents have very little idea what their children are viewing or who they are speaking to. Increasingly, we are coming to understand that giving our children unfettered access to the internet is a safeguarding risk. We should think about it not only as giving our children access to the internet, but as giving the internet access to our children.

Over the weekend, I listened to a brilliant podcast on the BBC about Greystones, a small town in County Wicklow, Ireland, where a group of headteachers came together to work with parents who signed a voluntary pledge to delay buying phones for their children until at least age 11. One of the headteachers said:

“You wouldn’t let your child open the door to a room full of strangers and leave them in that room on their own. And unfortunately, that is what is happening when they have a smart device.”

The need for action, with solutions that are practical, proportionate and can be implemented, is clear. One thing we risk doing is excluding children and young people from that conversation. That is why I recently held a student focus group at Harris Academy Beckenham and spoke to young people from every year group about the impact that smartphones are having on their everyday lives. I thank students including Arek, Sara and Rose for organising it, alongside one of their fantastic teachers, Leila Hussein. While the majority felt that the benefits of having a smartphone outweighed the downsides, over half of the students present said that smartphones and social media overall had a negative impact on their mental health. The same number admitted that they could not survive a week without a smartphone.

When I asked the students what they rely on their phones for, the top things on their list were schoolwork, chatting with friends and filling the time. When I asked what they would be most excited for if they had a phone-free day, their responses included going to the park, walking the dog, spending time with family, playing music and making art—all things that we would eagerly encourage our children to do more of. Overall, the students gave a balanced view. While they were all clued up on the risks and agreed that social media needed properly enforced age limits, they also saw the positive role that it can play if used in moderation and with the right protections.

Listening to different perspectives is important in this debate, and we should respect the idea that, in the large, parents know what is best for their children. I strongly believe that the best approach will be community-focused. Working as a community and creating voluntary codes and pacts means that we can support parents and schools and bring them with us. I believe it is clear to parents that this is coming from a place of concern, rather than judgment, that we share their fears and that we need to work together to address them. I pay tribute to the work of Smartphone Free Childhood, which has secured recent wins in Barnet, Southwark, Ealing and many more areas across London and the rest of the country.

I hope to learn from the examples in Beckenham and Penge as I continue to work with parents’ groups, local schools and students to find a way forward that will mean children and young people can lead happy, healthy and carefree childhoods while obtaining all the benefits that the digital world offers. That includes a meeting next week at Harris Academy Beckenham on Monday to bring stakeholders together.

I look forward to continuing to push social media companies to take greater responsibility in a range of areas including on age verification and the sort of content that children and young people are being exposed to daily. I strongly believe in the principle of reverse burden, which was explained really well by the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) when he said that we would not take such an approach to children’s toys or food. I again thank my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe for securing the debate and the Minister for his time.

5.45 pm

**Caroline Voaden** (South Devon) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I pay tribute to Kim and the other petitioners for bringing the petition to the House. In the Government’s response to the petition, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology referred to

“a systematic review by the UK Chief Medical Officers in 2019” that

“does not show a causal link between screen-based activities and mental health problems, though some studies have found associations with increased anxiety or depression. Therefore, the government is focused on building the evidence base to inform any future action.”

That review is six years old now, so how much evidence do the Government need? Things have changed radically in the past six years, and we live in a very different digital world from 2019.

The evidence I read in preparation for the debate included a 65% rise in mental health admissions to hospital among under-18s, a staggering 638% increase in admissions for eating disorders among girls aged 11 to 15, a 50% rise in childhood myopia, a 56% increase in ADHD diagnosis since the widespread adoption of smartphones, a 27% increase in just the last two years in the number of children with speech and language challenges, and a rise in obesity that means that about a quarter of children leaving primary school are now judged to be overweight or clinically obese. The evidence comes from the UK, Japan, Canada and Australia—it is all there and is growing.

As many other Members have said, we protect our children from smoking and alcohol. We do not allow them to buy those products because we know the damage they can do. Just because mental health damage is not as visible as a damaged lung or a damaged liver due to cirrhosis—just because we cannot see it, measure it and photograph it—that does not mean the evidence is not there. We can see it all around us.

This morning I spent time talking to the mental health leads in Devon about children’s mental health. They talked about the difficulty in employing enough psychologists and psychiatrists to cope with the mental health crisis among children in Devon, because of the vacancies they have and the ever-increasing need for

[Caroline Voaden]

children's mental health support—it just grows and grows. Although it is right to give children the mental health care that they need, which they and the parents ask for, we surely have to look at this the other way round and say, “We have to stop this rising trend and to look at the cause. We have to turn it on its head; we owe it to our children.”

As the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) said, all the graphs show that the change started in 2012. For the sake of our teachers, who are trying to cope with the ever-increasing pressure of special educational needs, autism spectrum disorders and so on, the time has come for us to act and not look for more evidence.

It is time we used the precautionary principle for smartphones. That enables decision makers to adopt precautionary measures when the scientific evidence about an environmental or human health hazard is uncertain but the stakes are high—and we know the stakes are high for our children. Some may see that as unscientific and an obstacle to progress, but to me it is an approach that can—and, in this situation, must—be used to protect the health of our youngest humans. The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology said the Online Safety Act

“puts a range of new duties on social media companies and search services, making them responsible for their users’ safety, with the strongest provisions in the Act for children.”

#### Platforms

“likely to be accessed by children will have a duty to take steps to prevent children from encountering the most harmful content”—such as—

“pornography and content that encourages, promotes, or provides instructions for self-harm, eating disorders, or suicide.”

We all know that we cannot trust the tech companies to do that. It is not in their interest. They have developed addictive apps to keep our children on them, using them hour after hour; it is not in their interest to do what is required to protect our children. Where, in the code, is a restriction of content that perpetuates the myth of the perfect body, that is not hardcore content like online pornography or suicide videos? The subtle stuff of social media—the addictiveness—is really dangerous. My concern is about the long hours that children spend on screens, and the time spent indoors instead of playing with friends and making real human connections.

Although we are talking about teenage use, what is even worse is the fact that 25% of three to four-year-olds in the UK now own a smartphone. Tiny children are looking at a screen rather than interacting with other humans. Children are not learning to speak and communicate, because babies do not learn from a machine. They are captivated by the videos, but they are not learning how to communicate with other humans. Older children are not experiencing boredom. We all remember standing at bus stops, right? We did not have a mobile phone; we got bored. We looked at the sky, around us and at other people. It is part of the development of the human brain. Has anyone ever seen a teenager standing at a bus stop now getting bored? It just does not happen.

I would like to leave the last word with John Gallacher, professor of cognitive health at the University of Oxford. He said that he found

“a linear relationship between higher rates of anxiety and depression and time spent networking on social media sites...In the most extreme cases, we had young people reporting they were spending up to eight hours a day using these sites.”

We must find a way to change that for our children. I do not believe in a ban on smartphones—that is not workable—but we must raise the minimum age for social media use. We must change the conversation and give parents the support they need, so that there is peer pressure not to have phones rather than to have them. We must support all the brave schools trying to eradicate this problem for their teenagers. I fully commend the petition and, cross party, we really need to do something about this.

5.52 pm

**Mrs Sarah Russell** (Congleton) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I did a lot of research in preparation for my speech today and, as a parent of three primary-age children, what I found really alarmed me. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children reports that there were more than 7,000 offences of sexual communication with children last year, which was a significant increase on the year before. It says that typically in those offences, the perpetrators start to talk to children on fairly mainstream web services, and then encourage them to communicate instead on more private messaging services such as Snapchat, WhatsApp and Instagram. I was pretty shocked. I did not appreciate that this was such a widespread problem. We all know that if there were 7,000 offences reported to the police, a considerably larger number will have happened. I also discovered the prevalence of dating app use among children. Children experience terrible offences when they go to meet people who were, in fact, adults preying on them.

Fundamentally, we need to understand that when we talk about social media, children are a product. If anything that we use on the internet does not cost any money, the gain for the provider is access to our thoughts, feelings and communications—in this case, our children's thoughts, feelings and communications with their friends. We have a generation now for whose entire lifespan those thoughts, feelings and communications with friends can be monetised and tracked across multiple different websites or social media apps. The complex picture that those companies have of our children is incredibly sophisticated, and their ability to target content at them is like nothing we have ever even imagined.

There is also a problem with parents inadvertently facilitating some of this stuff. I would count myself within that description to some extent, so it is certainly not judgmental. When a parent naively says that when a child is 13, they can access something that they would broadly consider uncontroversial—such as WhatsApp so they can chat to their friends—that creates an ageing risk throughout the lifespan of that app use. As was mentioned previously, children subsequently appear to be 16 or 18 before they actually are, and therefore obtain access to services that are unsafe for them much younger than they otherwise would have done. The parents do not appreciate the ageing risk that they are creating, potentially several years down the line.

The NSPCC says that we have a fundamental problem. We now have the Online Safety Act, introduced by the Conservatives, and we are working hard as a Government



to bring it into force. Ofcom has been given a significant role in looking at child risk assessment by online providers. We all know that if those people had children's best interests at heart, they would already have done a lot of the things that Ofcom requires. The fact that Ofcom is having to do an investigation into OnlyFans, and its ability or willingness to prevent under-age children from seeing sexualised content, does not sit comfortably—that is the minimum I will say about it.

[MARTIN VICKERS *in the Chair*]

If I am honest, I am not quite sure what the right solution is to those problems. If we do not get societal consensus on the right solution, we will, for instance, carry on seeing parents helping children to circumnavigate age restrictions, and children using VPNs to circumnavigate them themselves. Plenty of teenagers are sophisticated enough to do that. I am not sure what the right answer is. I am not sure that preventing under-16s from accessing such content will solve it. There is a risk that it will create a false sense of security and enable providers of the facilities and apps to say, "Well, under-16s can't use it. We don't have to put any safety features in because children are not allowed it anyway." They will completely abdicate responsibility.

It is important that we keep talking about these issues, and that we move forward on a cross-party basis. These are sophisticated problems and I am not sure whether we have a sufficiently sophisticated response to them. The Online Safety Act provides us with a lot of tools, and I can see that its potential fines of 10% of global revenue are quite high. That has the potential to drive some behaviour change, provided the companies involved really see that the tools have teeth. I hope that we will monitor very heavily how Ofcom gets on with the new legislation; I am sure that Members of all parties will be interested in that.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) said that he spoke to his children before the debate to tell them that he was going to raise these issues. I did so with my children over breakfast this morning, and one of them berated me for not having been in her online safety assembly. We have to be realistic about the capacity of both parents and schools to manage these issues without making it a blame game between different organisations—parents versus schools versus major corporations. These corporations have a huge vested interest in exploiting our children, and we have to figure out how better to protect them.

5.59 pm

**Gregor Poynton** (Livingston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on children's online safety, but I am contributing on my own behalf.

The opportunities and perils of social media are increasingly weighing on the minds of parents, educators, society and, above all, young people themselves. My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham and Penge (Liam Conlon) spoke about balance, which I think is one of the key issues. Our young people require digital skills and literacy in order to access the modern world, be it the world of work, public services or their social lives, and we need to give them the tools to do that. This has been a useful debate to think about how we do that.

We can see the strength of feeling about this measure reflected in the parliamentary petition that we are discussing. It is a petition signed by 92 of my Livingstone constituents, and it speaks to the widespread anxieties about the impact of social media on our children and young people. Those concerns are real and heartfelt, and they come from not only parents and communities, but young people themselves, who are having to navigate those digital landscapes every single day. They tell us that social media is not merely a tool for connection, but a space where the line between reality and illusion is often blurred, and where photoshopped images and curated lifestyles can distort self-perception.

I am convinced of the merits of enforcing a minimum-age requirement of 16 for social media on the Australian model. I am in favour on mental health grounds, with social media shown in study after study to be linked to increased anxiety, depression and low self-esteem for young people. I am in favour on online safety grounds, with social media exposing children to cyberbullying, predators, misinformation and harmful content. I am in favour in order to try to reverse children's decreasing attention spans; we need to give our kids the support they need to focus, to learn and to reach their full potential.

I believe, however, that it is vital not to leave young people out of those conversations, but to centre on their concerns and experiences. I spoke the other week to academic colleagues at the University of Manchester, who stressed the complexity and variety of young people's views on these subjects. They have conducted research, including focus groups, to understand how children use social media and what it means to them and their lives. They pointed out that a key concern of those young people in the focus groups, short of a ban, was the capacity to better distinguish between content that is real and content that is faked, manipulated or highly curated. Their point was not so much about disinformation or misinformation, but more about those perfect lifestyles that are shown on Instagram and other platforms. As has been mentioned, that is more insidious and not easy to ban, but it has a real effect on young people and on their perceptions of themselves and their lives.

That point brings me to the role of social media companies. Many hon. Members have mentioned those companies in this debate, and it is right to say that they have not taken enough responsibility for the content on their sites. The incentive at the moment is to let loose, for eyeballs and time spent, rather than to ensure that the content is properly moderated and is going to the right people. We already have various minimum-age restrictions in place, but the challenge has been to enforce them. Social media companies must adhere to and enforce them. With or without a ban, we need more effective oversight and accountability for how those platforms operate. There is also a vital role for industry leaders such as Google and Apple through their app stores. These gatekeepers possess significant influence and could do much more to ensure that age verification and content moderation is robust and reliable.

Hon. Members have also mentioned smartphone bans. I was pleased that at the Scottish Labour conference at the weekend Anas Sarwar, our leader in Scotland, said that in our manifesto for the 2026 Scottish parliamentary elections will be a ban on mobile phone use in Scottish schools. That gives parents and educators—and children

[Gregor Poynton]

themselves—clarity on what we think is right and not right. I do not believe that having phones in schools is right for children or for the educators trying to do their jobs.

I believe that the minimum age for social media is an idea whose time has come. For me, it is a matter of protection and of ensuring that we prepare young people mentally and emotionally as best we can to handle the pressures that social media can bring. Even without a ban, however, we must ensure today that existing age limits are being properly and rigorously enforced, and we must engage robustly with the tech companies to ensure that they are doing all they can to protect our young people and children.

6.4 pm

**Irene Campbell** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): It is a great privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I thank my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) for securing this debate, and for his excellent speech. I thank Kim Campbell and the other petitioners who have brought this subject to debate today.

I recently met with one of my constituents in North Ayrshire and Arran, Sam Rice, who told me about the charity he set up called Kids For Now. He was extremely concerned about a lot of things that have been discussed already, so I will not repeat that, but he shared with me the work of his campaign, which is all about smartphones and social media use in children. His organisation Kids For Now is a grassroots movement that connects parents within the UK to help to delay smartphones together. It is not really about banning them entirely, but about delaying their use and working on campaigns calling for child-safe phones in the UK. He very much mentioned child-safe phones, but I am not sure that young people want the old-style phones that we all used to use and rather than a smartphone like the rest of their peer group. He also mentioned banning smartphones in Scottish schools. My hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Gregor Poynton) has just stolen my line on that as well, because we were delighted that that pledge was made at the Labour conference in Glasgow at the weekend—that was very positive.

My constituent Sam also spoke about making primary schools internet free. Now a lot of this is obviously up for debate, but what he said to me was that he helps parents to take positive collective action against peer pressure and challenges the norm of young children feeling as though they need social media. We have discussed a lot of that today as well—including other things people can do while standing at a bus stop. When I was growing up there were clearly no mobile phones, so that was not a distraction we were ever going to have, but it is really important that we actually have time for our children to be children.

Sam was extremely concerned about the mental and emotional health of children, as has been discussed today. For example, as has been said, research from the project Delay Smartphones found that children can no longer have any respite from bullies at home. It said a shocking 84% of bullying of children with smartphones now happens online. That is a huge figure. Additionally,

smartphones and social media are more likely to expose children to sexual and offensive content, which can include young people being pressured into sending sexual images of themselves. For example, Ofsted found that 80% of teenage girls are being put under pressure to provide images of themselves.

When we look at a strategy tackling violence against women and girls, that needs to be considered because of the damage that access to social media can have on young girls. It is really important to consider young people's safety on the internet in a time where technology is constantly evolving and changing. I am pleased that this debate is taking place to allow for further consideration of where we go with this conversation, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's response on the future of smartphone and social media legislation.

6.7 pm

**Sam Rushworth** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I thank the British public for bringing this petition forward so that we can debate it today, and thank those who have led on this issue. The petition comes from a place of real strong feeling among parents. This is not some blind moral panic; it is the lived experience of anybody who has raised a teenager in the last few years. My wife and I spend a lot of our time discussing our own parenting. Like many parents, we agonise over whether we are getting it right—on the one hand, wanting not to be too autocratic and to give our children the freedom to engage in a social space which their friends are in, while, on the other, knowing that we are allowing them access to something that we believe is causing them damage.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) for an excellent speech setting out the strong evidence base for why it is imperative that we, as a Parliament, act. There have been some excellent speeches from Members across all the parties in this place today. I was reflecting, were I ever fortunate enough to place where my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington did in the private Member's ballot, and to be able to do one thing to improve our country right now, what I would do. I think that he has got it right—it has to be about what we do to protect the next generation. It is not a cliché to say that they are all our futures and that we face an epidemic of youth mental unwellness today that is holding back a generation.

Many people have spoken well about the damage that we know social media is causing to our children: apps that are designed to addict, requiring users to get streaks, which we know affects concentration; an over-connectedness that is driving anxiety and disrupting children's sleep; content that distorts children's relationships with reality on bodies and lifestyles, which is damaging to self-esteem, and, while some of these sites do not host explicitly pornographic material, in the sense that certain body parts are covered, children are often overexposed to a general timbre of content that is still sexualising the human body and causing them to think in sexualised terms at a young age. There is also the challenge of apps that are designed for children to communicate through images, which are driving the phenomenon known as sexting. Despite schools' valiant efforts to teach children not to do that, we know it is happening—and happening at a worrying scale.

We also know that children are overconnected to a social space, which is completely unsupervised, where they can encounter humiliation and bullying. I had a conversation not long ago with a child and asked the question, “Well, why don’t you just not go online?” The response came back, “Because I need to know what people are saying about me.” As the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) suggested earlier, if young people were asked, “If you could switch this off for everyone, would you?” lots of them would actually say, “Yes, I would.” However, there is a phenomenon, which my teenagers tell me is called FOMO—fear of missing out—that means that they have to be in a space, while simultaneously not wanting to be in that space, all the time.

In our generation, we might have found school life difficult, but we could go home from school and switch off. For many children today, the first thing they experience when they wake up in the morning is the notifications from the night before, and those notifications are the last thing they see when they go to bed at night.

Therefore, I think we do need to regulate. We already regulate childhood in various ways to protect children, such as with laws that prevent children from going to nightclubs, the requirement for disclosure and barring service checks to protect children from coming into contact with adults around whom they would not be safe, and even film classification ratings. There is a huge industry around those ratings—yet, were the content that children can access on Facebook to be classified by film standards, we would often say that they were not old enough to be seeing that regular content.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Luke Murphy) said earlier, many children and young people actually agree about the benefits of limiting social media. Before I was in this place, one of the roles I had was tutoring in various north-east high schools, and often our conversations in seminars would turn to this challenge of mental health. A lot of young people talked to me about how they can simultaneously feel lonely while also being overly connected and not having a place to switch off.

Girls at Teesdale school, which was my first visit as a new Member of Parliament, also talked to me about a change in attitudes that they saw among many of the young men that they go to school with and the increasing misogyny in the way that they would treat them, because of far-right content that those young men were accessing.

What can be done? People have spoken for and against an outright ban, and I think all their arguments have merits, and some have highlighted the challenge of simply banning things. Having said that, I think we do need to consider an age of consent; we need not just a legal shift, but a cultural shift, with greater parental controls and greater support for parents to supervise what their children are viewing. Perhaps we could have time-limit controls that would force a child to switch off.

Education around social media already exists, but we know that it is not yet effective. Perhaps we need education that looks not just at the don’ts, the warnings to young people, but at the do’s and reimagines childhood. We need to provide fewer virtual experiences and more real experiences for our children. I think back to my own childhood and remember learning an instrument, playing after-school sports, riding my bike around the block, attending a weekly youth club, going for a walk and

bopping along to my Walkman, and yes, it also involved being bored and just being able to take in the world around me.

Children need more family time. We need to be real and acknowledge the fact that one of the things driving smartphone use in children is that parents are often less present in their children’s lives, and every parent feels guilt about this. That is why I was proud to support the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers’ “Keep Sunday Special” campaign on Sunday trading laws. It is why I support flexible working and laws in the world of work to make sure that families can have time together.

There are many things to be considered, but what we can all agree on is that we cannot allow the status quo to continue. It is imperative that we as a Parliament and the Government consider how to better safeguard our children’s future.

6.16 pm

**Naushabah Khan** (Gillingham and Rainham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I am grateful to have the opportunity to speak in this debate, because the safety of young people online is possibly one of the most pressing challenges of our time.

I have a confession to make: I hate social media, but I feel compelled to use it. It cannot be denied that social media is an inescapable reality of modern life. For young people, it plays a role in how they interact with the world, form their identities and access information. I do not for a second dispute that social media is a tool of extraordinary power for connection, education and creativity, but it has increasingly become a space where harm is done that is profound, persistent and deeply damaging. Legislative change has not kept up with the pace of social media growth. As a society, we are playing catch-up to the impact of social media, and we are not doing it fast enough.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) detailed, the evidence base that surrounds this is much debated, but something we can all agree on is that numerous studies have exposed declining mental health in adolescents and rising cases of anxiety, depression and self-harm. Algorithms are designed to drive engagement on platforms. They do not prioritise wellbeing. Instead, they prioritise views, clicks and the user’s attention. It is easy to see how our children become passive observers of extreme content and harmful trends when harmful material does not need to be sought out but is instead delivered to their phones.

Unfortunately, it does not just stop at exposure to harmful content. The dangerous reality of the online world is that it has become a hunting ground for those who seek to manipulate and exploit others. We have seen the rise of online grooming facilitated by the anonymity of fake profiles. We are in a situation where children are being targeted in their own homes through their own devices by individuals who have never had easier access to them. I understand why parents are worried. Since being elected I have received numerous representations from concerned parents in Gillingham and Rainham who just want their children to exist and go through life free from harm. I appreciate that everybody wants that, but they perceive the risk to their children now extends into sanctuary of their own home. They see no pause, no protection and no escape.



[Naushabah Khan]

While I support a review of the minimum age for social media access—there is certainly a need to look at it in closer detail—I do not think that will be a quick fix that solves the issues we face at this point. I encourage everyone here to go and speak to an average 15-year-old—clearly, some hon. Members have already done so, as their speeches today show. One finds very quickly that they are extremely capable of being inventive and circumventing the rules. That is what teenagers have done since time immemorial. The fundamental problem is that these platforms were never designed with the safety of children in mind. We would be doing our children a disservice by raising a legal barrier and simply hoping that the risk disappears, because that is not what will happen. Children deserve more. They deserve more responsibility from social media companies, more urgency from regulators and perhaps more action from us, the Members elected to this House.

The Online Safety Act was a huge step in the right direction under the previous Government, but we must ensure that the protections are not diluted to the point where obligations are placed on platforms only where they are seen to be the least burdensome. Harm reduction for our children must remain the fundamental priority. I welcome this Government's commitment to working with Ofcom to effectively implement the 2023 Act so that children benefit from the protections as soon as possible, but clearly the legislation alone will not be enough. We have heard powerful speeches about cultural change. Implementation must also be done at speed and with determination. Ofcom is now armed with new regulatory powers and must move at pace to protect our children from the harms that colleagues across the House have spoken about time and again. We have to get this right.

My constituents in Gillingham and Rainham are particularly interested in ensuring that implementation of measures such as user identity verification are sped up, so that adults and children alike can benefit from the protections. We need to send out a clear signal that delays will not be tolerated and that platforms need to be held to account. Various platforms do that to different degrees, and some are much better than others, but all still have a long way to go. Online safety should be not a distant ambition, but acknowledged to be an immediate necessity, because every day that action is delayed, another young person is exposed to harm, and we have to prevent that.

I end by thanking my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) for introducing this debate. It is incredibly important that we continue this conversation. I also thank the Minister for his time and for listening to the powerful representations that have been made today.

6.22 pm

**Patrick Hurley** (Southport) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I will set out some facts and figures before moving on to the substance of my speech. Seventy-one per cent of children report having experienced harm online. Twenty-one per cent of children report having been contacted online by adults they do not know. Vulnerable children are twice as likely as their peers to encounter online bullying.

Fifty-seven per cent of parents report that their children's sleep patterns are being negatively affected by online activity. And here is the killer stat: despite the age limit of 13, 85% of 9 to 12-year-olds are reported to use social media. It is obvious that a mere increase in the threshold to 16 years of age is insufficient; the measure needs to go hand in hand with enforcement.

Many Members in this debate have, rightly, concentrated on the harms to children. My hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) somewhat stole my thunder by so eloquently drawing an analogy with smoking in the 1950s. I have truncated my speech accordingly, but the analogy is accurate: we are now at the stage where social media usage is analogous to smoking in the 1950s. Obvious harm is being done, but we are not yet at a stage where we can accurately quantify it, categorise it or come to a settled conclusion on how to deal with it.

Evidence continues to emerge around harmful content, disrupted sleep patterns, damage to the mental health of children, addictiveness and more, but we as a society, a Government, a Parliament and politicians do not yet know how to adequately deal with all of that. As a starting point, I support an increase in age restrictions, in line with the petition, but we need to learn more about the causes of the problems affecting our younger generations and find out how to prevent them for future generations. In addition to an increase in the age limit, I want stronger enforcement of age limits by Ofcom and through self-regulation by social media companies. We also need more high-quality, robust research to prove causality beyond any doubt.

I finish with an aspect that has not been touched on in the debate. Last week in the House, I noted how there is increasingly a political element, where social media companies reflect the national interests of the host countries in which they are situated. There are national interest considerations for the UK in regulation of social media. We do not want foreign agents and foreign actors to influence our democratic process in relation to adults and we certainly do not want them to influence the formation of the politics of our children.

6.26 pm

**Victoria Collins** (Harpden and Berkhamsted) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. We are holding this debate because over 128,000 people across the UK signed a petition calling for social media companies to be banned from letting children under 16 create accounts. This reflects a deep and growing concern among parents and professionals about the impact of social media on our children's wellbeing. I thank Kim Campbell for launching the petition and thank Members across the Chamber for their contributions to the debate and for their consensus on action.

At the heart of the call for social media companies to be banned from letting children under 16 create accounts is a mental health crisis that requires a public health emergency response. The evidence is stark, as was eloquently highlighted by the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) and reinforced by my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers). Between 2016 and 2024, child contact with mental health services increased by 477%, rising from 96,000 to

458,000 cases—and those are just the ones reaching out to those services. There has been a fivefold increase in eating disorders among 11 to 16-year-olds, particularly girls. Our young people are struggling, and social media's role cannot be ignored.

I have spoken to young people in schools across my local area of Harpenden and Berkhamsted. Young men and women alike are worried about the content they are consuming and the impact it has on them and their friends. Young people told me about their concern for their mental health, and young men told me that they are seeing things they do not want to see. Young girl guides told me that they worry about bullying, online harm and the impact it is having on the young men around them. Many parents have also written to me about their concerns. That is why I launched a “Safer Screens” tour, to listen to young people first hand, as well as parents, teachers and healthcare professionals.

The current system is fundamentally broken. Social media platforms remain easily accessible to young children despite having minimum age limits. Social media companies must go further to implement those limits, as the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) highlighted. Even more concerning, the platforms' own designs actively work against child safety. They are built with features that nudge children to share photos, videos and location data—indeed, all of us have been victims of those nudges. Their recommender systems can push harmful content, from extreme dieting to self-harm, continuously to vulnerable young users.

The Online Safety Act is a step forward, but it has critical gaps, particularly in addressing those addictive design features. As the hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) highlighted, this is the wild west; the hon. Member for Darlington (Lola McEvoy), who I know has done a lot of work on the issue, reinforced that point. Although the Act made important progress on harmful content, it failed to address the fundamental issue: the addictive architecture of the platforms themselves.

As my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) highlighted, these are not neutral tools; they are precision-engineered addiction machines. Every pull to refresh, every infinite scroll and every notification is designed to trigger dopamine pathways, similarly to what happens in gambling or substance abuse. As research from the University of Sussex shows, teen social media binges mirror behaviour seen in drug addiction. I absolutely welcome the work that the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington has done and is doing to push forward his private Member's Bill to address the issue. Between one in three and one in 10 young people now show behaviours consistent with problematic smartphone use. That is not an accident; it is by design, and that design puts profit before children's wellbeing.

As the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) highlighted, we should look at what other countries are doing. Australia is moving to ban social media for under-16s entirely. Norway is raising the age of consent for data processing to 15 and developing a robust age verification system. France has passed a new law requiring parental consent in relation to minors under 15. Those countries recognise, as this petition does, that we must act decisively to protect our children. That is why the Liberal Democrats are calling for an

explicit public health approach to children's social media use. Just as we eventually recognised that cigarettes and gambling products needed strict regulation—as my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) and the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington highlighted—we must now acknowledge that social media requires similar oversight.

Let me be clear: this is not just about social media. It is about age-appropriate experience across the online world. We cannot ignore other reasons why children are gravitating to phones. As the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) highlighted, if youth clubs are closed, sports facilities are underfunded or safe community centres are out of reach, the path of least resistance is to spend hours online. A real shift in tackling screen overuse must include supporting these third spaces—providing well-funded, welcoming spots where young people can socialise, explore hobbies and simply be children.

**Melanie Ward** (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady share my concern about what seems to be a growing phenomenon in my area of Fife, where young people are filming themselves committing acts of violent crime and then sharing the footage on social media? Last month, there was an attack on a young boy in Cowdenbeath by a group of other youths; they filmed it and shared the footage on Snapchat. Does the hon. Lady agree that although raising the online age of consent to 16 would not solve that problem completely and it would need to be properly enforced, it would be an important first step in tackling this kind of harm?

**Victoria Collins:** I am so sorry to hear about what is happening in Fife. I am sure that other Members across the House see that impact. Social media reinforces negative images, thereby changing social norms, so there is a wider problem, but there are indeed important first steps that need to be taken.

I was talking about providing well-funded, welcoming spots where young people can socialise, explore hobbies and simply be children, without the allure of an endlessly scrolling feed or of sharing those viral images that reinforce dopamine hits. That is an important aspect. Investing in after-school programmes, libraries and youth clubs not only gives children alternative outlets, but strengthens mental health, builds social skills and eases the pressure on parents to supervise every minute of screen time. In short, offline opportunities are just as crucial as any digital safeguard.

To tackle the public health emergency in relation to mental health for young people, we need three immediate actions. The first is the establishment of a safer screens taskforce empowered to ensure that a public health approach to children's social media is taken across all Departments, examining international best practice and developing comprehensive solutions. That includes ensuring measures for protective defaults on phones and other connected devices, and looking at safety by design, such as having no infinite scrolling, no notifications at night and no addictive engagement algorithms unless explicitly enabled by a parent. Secondly, all children should receive stand-alone education on online safety and safer screens at each key stage. Children and parents need to be equipped with the skills to navigate this digital world. Thirdly, we must expand safe third spaces to give young people a true alternative to being on their screens.

[Victoria Collins]

I started my uni days without social media, but ended them with it. It is worrying to say that that was 20 years ago, so this is not an overnight phenomenon; it is a debate that has been a long time in the making. The Government have stated that a ban on under-16 social media use is on the table. Now is the time to look carefully at international precedents and bring forward whatever measures will be effective, practical and implementable to keep our children safe. We need to protect parents' rights to make decisions, but let us be clear: we already accept age restrictions on activities that can harm children's development. We do not let under-18s gamble or buy cigarettes. We have age ratings on films and video games. We cannot allow our children's developing minds to be left at the mercy of platforms that are deliberately designed to be addictive.

Parents are crying out for support. They want help from the Government and industry in managing their children's online safety. We simply must get this right. Whether the answer is an outright ban at 16, as the petition suggests, age-appropriate experiences across the digital landscape, or a robust system of graduated access with proper age assurances and parental oversight, one thing is clear: the status quo is failing our children.

6.35 pm

**Ben Obese-Jecty** (Huntingdon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I thank the Petitions Committee for enabling this debate; Kim Campbell for launching the petition; the hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) for opening the debate; and the 128,000 signatories of the petition, including 225 people from my constituency of Huntingdon.

In a recent survey by More in Common of more than 2,000 parents, social media and excessive screen time was ranked as the top issue affecting children's mental wellbeing: parents ranked it higher on the list of threats than alcohol, bullying and financial problems. Exposure to harmful content online was deemed the second biggest risk to mental health. The challenges facing children have changed astronomically in recent years. Children now face a boiling point of addiction, constant connectivity, online crime and harmful content. Many feel that it has become too much for children to handle.

The evidence base is growing stronger. Smartphones and social media are adversely impacting our children's mental health. The Royal Society for Public Health says that about 70% of young people now report that social media increases their feelings of anxiety and depression. In increasing numbers, children are coming into schools up and down the UK having stayed up all night on their phone. A child who has not had a healthy night's sleep is not equipped to contribute to the classroom, except perhaps to disrupt it.

Evidence from Health Professionals for Safer Screens shows that children who routinely spend extended periods on their smartphones have poorer eyesight, inhibited speech and language development, interrupted sleep and rising rates of anxiety. Smartphones are designed to be addictive. Platforms are constantly seeking to develop new design strategies that encourage children to stay online longer. Notifications, comments and likes are

designed to drive feelings of happiness. It is easy for children to feel obliged to engage and even compete with their peers online.

Of course, children access social media on mobile phones via the internet. Individually, each tool brings its own benefits. Mobile phones allow children to let parents know that they have reached school safely, providing an extra safeguard that allows them greater and earlier independence. The internet itself allows children to further their education, whether through research tasks, homework or practising coding; it also provides better connectivity, information and entertainment. The internet is so integral to society that we must ensure that children have the skillset and the know-how to navigate it.

I expect that many hon. Members use social media every day, scrolling through their feeds, checking the news or drafting updates to their constituents. Social media has its benefits, not least because it allows us to communicate with people instantly and en masse, wherever they may be in the world. Used responsibly, social media can provide some benefits for children. Children may use it to stay connected with friends and family around the world. They may use it for civic engagement or to fundraise; they may use YouTube or short reels for online learning or content discovery.

The drawbacks, however, are considerable: addiction to their screen, online bullying and exposure to harmful content such as eating disorders, self-harm and body shaming. There is some bad content on the internet. It is deeply concerning that half of 13-year-olds reported seeing hardcore, misogynistic pornographic material on social media sites. There are widespread concerns that this is impacting the way young people understand healthy relationships, sex and consent. Half of parents worry that online pornography is giving their children an unrealistic view of sex. We see the same with knife crime: there is constant exposure to content that glamorises violence, exposes children to a world of criminality, gangs and scoreboard videos, and contributes to the perception that every teenager carries a knife and thus drives the urge for them to carry one themselves, too often with deadly consequences.

What can be done to tackle these issues? The previous Government passed the world-leading Online Safety Act, which places significant new responsibilities and duties on social media platforms and search services to increase child safety online. Platforms will be required to prevent children from accessing harmful and age-inappropriate content and to provide parents and children with clear and accessible ways to report problems online when they arise. As well as content, the Act applies to service functionality, including the way in which platforms are operated and used by children. Will the Minister confirm whether platforms will be obliged to manage and mitigate addictive functions if a provider's risk assessment identifies habit forming that could cause sufficient harm?

We are cleaning up the online space with world-leading legislation and an enforced regulator, but I worry that that is not enough. We should be having a conversation about the use of mobile phones in schools. The previous Government took action and issued guidance backing headteachers in restricting access to phones in schools. However, new research has shown that only 11% of schools are genuinely smartphone free, while children at



smartphone-free schools get one to two grades higher at GCSE. That is why the Opposition tabled an amendment to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill to ban mobile phone use in schools. It was disappointing that the Government rejected that amendment and that argument. Will the Minister update us on what conversations he has had with colleagues in the Department for Education about that policy?

Conservatives want to put the safety of children first. I hope that the Minister agrees with that aim. The More in Common poll showed that nearly nine in 10 parents—86%—backed raising from 13 to 16 the so-called digital age of consent, the point at which children should be allowed on social media. Some Members have also proposed banning social media for children under 16. I note that the Secretary of State has not ruled that out, saying that it is “on the table” and that he “is not currently minded” to enact such a policy.

Instead, the Government have announced the launch of a study to explore the effects of smartphone and social media use on children. It seeks to build the evidence base for future decisions designed to keep children safe online. The work is being led by a team at the University of Cambridge, with contributions from researchers at other leading universities. The project lead, Dr Amy Orben, says:

“There is huge concern about the impact of smartphone use on children's health, but the evidence base remains fairly limited. While the government is under substantial time pressure to make decisions, these will undoubtedly be better if based on improved evidence.”

The Opposition agree that the evidence base needs to be improved, and we welcome the study.

The last piece of substantial Government-backed research into children and mobile phone use was completed in 2019, before covid. We know the devastating impact of lockdown on children and how pandemic restrictions forced children to connect with their friends and schoolteachers online. That pushed children towards technology and social media, potentially leading to irreversible changes in behaviour.

However, the timeline for the work is unclear. Although the research should be detailed and thorough, its publication should be timely. Will the Minister please outline when the study will report back to the Department and, given the dangers of delay, whether he has considered speeding it up? I am aware that the Children's Commissioner has recently done some work to better understand the impact of mobile phones on children. Her insight could prove very valuable while the academics are researching in depth. I presume that the Minister has spoken to the commissioner, but can he update the House on what he has learned from those discussions? I would be grateful for the Minister's comments on those points.

The poll is a clear illustration of the strength of feeling among parents, but we all know—from our own families and our conversations with parents, teachers and children in our constituencies—the impact on children of mobile phones and social media. As legislators, we have a responsibility to ensure that the online world is a safe place for our children. We also have a responsibility to ensure that online platforms take their obligations seriously. I am pleased that the previous Government's Online Safety Act delivers on both those points, and I urge the Minister to ensure that it is fully implemented as soon as possible.

6.43 pm

**The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant):** It is always a delight to see you, Mr Vickers—and particularly to see you in the Chair, where you cannot take part in the debate.

First, may I pay enormous tribute to Kim Campbell? Many other Members have already done so, but it is a significant achievement to force Parliament to debate something. Getting 130,000 people to sign up to the petition is a phenomenal achievement, so thank you very much. I think I can say that on behalf of all the political parties in Parliament and all Members of the House.

I also thank my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan): first because he is a Labour Member for Folkestone and Hythe, which is a great advance in the world, and secondly because he advanced the cause on behalf of the Petitions Committee so effectively. Many Members may not know this, but when I was first elected back in 1873 under Queen Victoria, we did not have online petitions. It is an irony, in a way, that today we are talking about an online e-petition about online activity.

If colleagues do not mind, I will not answer each contribution individually. Members have put their own arguments powerfully; there has been a mix of views, but with a general direction of travel, which I fully understand and to which I am very sympathetic. I want to lay out where we are at now and where we, as a Government, think that we could get to and should get to.

The first thing to recognise is the utter toxicity of large parts of social media. You do not have to be an MP to be aware of that, but being an MP certainly does make you aware of it. The toxicity for children is utterly degrading and pernicious, as I think everybody in society recognises. We all recognise, too, that the social media companies need to go much further to protect children. We have talked about some of the misogyny that is evident on many platforms and to which kids have access—it is pumped at them, in fact, because that is sometimes what the algorithm seems to support. Similarly, there are large amounts of utter misinformation. I do not know who is driving that or why it is being driven; sometimes it may be state actors from elsewhere in the world, and sometimes it is just pernicious actors in their own right.

Completely unrealistic body shapes are being promoted to girls and, for that matter, to boys. There was a time when the concern was solely that girls were being encouraged to be a particular shape, but exactly the same concern applies to many young men and boys today. I used to be a priest in the Church of England, many years ago; I was a clergyman in High Wycombe. While I was the curate there, a young girl took her own life, and then three of her friends took their own life in successive months. Undoubtedly, they had somehow or other managed to engage one another in that spiral. That was long before social media. Now, social media can play a pernicious role in undermining young people's self-confidence and their belief in themselves through a whole series of images, videos and so on. That is very dangerous.

Tackling this is one of the most important things that the Government have to do. It is good to have a former Education Secretary, the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), with us today.

**Mr Frith:** Will the Minister give way?

**Chris Bryant:** Yes, of course; my hon. Friend is always intervening on me.

**Mr Frith:** I thank the Minister; as ever, he has been very generous and is making excellent remarks. Away from the emergency—the toxicity and the worst aspects of this—the mundane sapping of hour after hour after hour is just as dangerous when we consider social media use and our ineffective guardrails for smartphone use. Yes, we all agree that the content the Minister has described should be done away with and prevented, but what is his reflection on the mundane drip and sapping away of the energy and attention of our young people and the doomscrolling ethos that has developed in their expectation of their everyday lives?

**Chris Bryant:** I do not want to be a hypocrite; this 63-year-old engages in all those things as well. In fact, it is a shocking shame for me every time I get that notification that says, “You spent on average x number of hours a day on your mobile phone.” I can make justifications—I have to find out what an hon. Member’s seat is, I have to send things back to my private office on WhatsApp and all of those kind of things—but the truth is that if somebody had said to us 40 years ago that they were going to invent something that would make us all, in an addictive way, spend hours and hours and hours looking at a phone rather than engaging with other human beings, we would have said, “Maybe not, eh?”

I was really struck by that when I went to a primary school in Blaengarw in my patch. The headteacher was saying that one of the difficulties is that all the parents waiting to pick up their kids were on their mobile phones outside, as the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett) mentioned earlier. Whatever they did inside the school, the message that every single child got was that life was about being on a mobile phone. As has been said, one of the most important things that a parent can do is engage eye to eye with their children. If they are engaging eye to eye only with their phone, I would argue that that is as much of a problem. I will come on to some of the issues, but I do not want to be hypocritical about it.

I think we all accept that we have to do more. One thing that was not included in the list of things that someone might do if they did not have a mobile phone to spend all their time on was reading a book. I would love more young people to read a book. That longer attention span is one of the things that is an admirable part of being an adult human being.

Several hon. Members referred to the fact that legislation needs to keep up. I will put this very gently to Conservative Members: we argued for an online safety Act for a long time before one ended up becoming legislation. It went through a draft process, and there were lots of rows about what should and should not be in it, and whether we were impinging on freedom of speech and all those kinds of things, but the legislation did not end up on the statute books until the end of 2023. Even then, the Act provided for a fairly slow process of implementation thereafter, partly because Ofcom was taking on powers that, on that day, it simply would not have had enough staff to engage with. The process has been difficult, and I am absolutely certain that the Online Safety Act will

not be the end of this story. That is why the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology has said clearly that everything is “on the table”, and that is why today’s debate is so important.

Of course, legislation has to be proportionate, balanced, based on evidence—I will come to that in more detail in a moment—and effective. That is why the Online Safety Act will require all platforms that are in scope, including social media platforms, to set up robust systems and processes to tackle the most egregious illegal content or activity proactively, preventing users from encountering it in the first place. Platforms will be required to remove all other illegal content as soon as it is flagged to them.

The Act will also require platforms easily accessed by children—this goes to a point made by several people—to deploy measures to protect children from seeing content that is harmful to them. That includes the use of highly effective age assurance to prevent them from seeing the most harmful types of content, such as that which promotes, encourages or provides instructions for self-harm, suicide or eating disorders. Platforms will also be required to provide age-appropriate access for other types of harmful content, such as bullying, abusive content or content that encourages dangerous stunts or serious violence.

Additionally, under the Act, providers that specify a minimum age limit to access their site must specify how they enforce that in their terms of service and must do so consistently. As many Members have said, this spring will be a key moment in the implementation of the Act, and that is an important point for us to recognise: later this year, things will change, because of the implementation of the Online Safety Act. Ofcom has already set out its draft child safety codes of practice, which are the measures that companies must take to fulfil their duties under the Act.

Ofcom’s draft codes outline that all in-scope services, including social media sites, will be required to tackle algorithms that amplify harm and feed harmful material to children. I would argue that that includes the process of trying to make something addictive for a child. Services will have to configure their algorithms to filter out the most harmful types of content from children’s feeds, and to reduce the visibility and prominence of other harmful content. In January, Ofcom published its guidance for services to implement highly effective age assurance to meet their duties, including the types of technology capable of being highly effective at correctly determining whether a user is a child.

**Josh MacAlister:** Will the Minister give way?

**Chris Bryant:** Yes, of course. I am about to come to my hon. Friend’s speech, in fact.

**Josh MacAlister:** I and a number of colleagues have had fairly extensive dialogue with Ofcom over the past few months about some of the detailed points, and there are two important gaps in the existing legislation. First, social media companies might put in a minimum age requirement, but there is no power to provide that social media platforms need to have a minimum age requirement to start with, so there is a big gap in the legislation in that respect. Secondly, despite the fairly extensive drafting in the Act, there is no requirement on Ofcom to look at functionality beyond where it relates

to harmful content. Ofcom has stated clearly in writing to myself and other Members that it cannot regulate functionality unless it is specifically about harmful content, so much of what has been discussed today would not be covered by Ofcom's current powers.

**Chris Bryant:** There are four or five different areas where the legislation is not sufficient for the task. Both codes require parliamentary approval, but that process will happen in the next few weeks, with the powers coming into effect this spring. As a Government, we have to decide whether it is better to make that happen now and bed it in, or say that we will have another piece of legislation. I am not allowed to make commitments on behalf of the Government, but I would be absolutely amazed if they did not bring forward further legislation in this field in the next few years. All these issues—and the others that will come along—will definitely need to be addressed, not least because, as my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe said at the beginning of the debate, we need to make sure that the legislation is up to date.

My hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) talked about the burden of proof, and he is quite right. Of course there should not be a one-way burden of proof. We have to bear in mind two things about proof—perhaps evidence is a better word, because it is not about criminality; it is about evidence-based policy. The first is that, as everybody has said, causation is not correlation. I apologise for the slightly flippant way of putting this, but Marathon became Snickers at the same time as Mrs Thatcher gave way to John Major. I am not aware of any causal relationship between those two events. Many people understand that, but it is often very difficult to weed out what is causation and what is correlation in a specific set of events. For instance, we have all laid out the problems in relation to mental health for children, but only one Member mentioned covid. I would argue that covid is quite a significant player. It was shocking that we strove hard as a Parliament to open pubs again before we opened schools, and that children, who were at the least risk, bore the heaviest burden and that sacrifice on behalf of others. I think we need to factor that in.

The second point is something that I have campaigned on for quite a long time: acquired brain injury. Children from poorer backgrounds are four times more likely to suffer a brain injury under the age of five than kids from wealthier backgrounds, and again in their teenage years. Acquired brain injury in schools is barely recognised. Some schools respond to it remarkably well, but it is likely that there are somewhere between one and three children with a brain injury in every single primary class in this land. Nobody has yet done sufficient work on how much that has contributed to the mental health problems that children have today. We certainly know that the use of phones and screens after brain injury is a significant added factor, but we need to look at all the factors that affect the mental health of children to ensure that we target the specific things that really will work in a combination of policy changes.

**Damian Hinds:** The Minister speaks with a great deal of knowledge and authority, particularly on acquired brain injury, but I want to come back to the covid point. Obviously, a Westminster Hall debate is not the place to

establish correlation versus causality in any sense. However, if we look at a graph of what has happened with children's and young people's mental ill health in this country, France, Germany and the United States, while the data are not perfectly comparable, the shape of the line is not consistent with the hypothesis that it is mainly the result of covid. It predates covid, and it carries on going up afterwards.

**Chris Bryant:** I am sorry if I indicated that it was mainly covid; I was not trying to say that at all. I am simply saying that that is one factor, and there may be many others—social factors, personal factors and the structure of education. One could argue, as one of my hon. Friends did, that there are other things that kids could do in society. We might, for instance, want to intervene by having a creative education option. We hardly have a youth service in most of the country any more.

**Damian Hinds:** The Minister would be making perfectly adequate points if we were talking only about this country. We could make all sorts of points about what Government policy was and what happened to Sure Start, the curriculum and youth clubs, but those things did not happen in France, Germany or the United States.

**Chris Bryant:** I have not seen any of the statistics for what has happened to youth services and the cultural education offer in schools in France and other countries.

**Damian Hinds:** I think the Minister takes my point.

**Chris Bryant:** No, I do not. I am trying to make a very simple point: many factors have contributed to the mental health problems that many young people have, and social media is undoubtedly one. The question is, how do we rate and address all those different factors? As the hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted (Victoria Collins) said, we must address this from a public health angle, and that is essential. But then, when we have the whole bag of evidence, rather than just individual bits of evidence, the question is, what is the most useful intervention that we can make?

I want to come on to the definition issues. Several Members raised the issue of what social media is. That is partially addressed by the Online Safety Act, but we may want to go further. As to the reason why the previous Government landed on 13 rather than 16—which was an option available to them—the consultation at the time came back with 13. It is interesting that Members referred to content availability and to there being two ages in the UK that are generally reckoned to be part of the age of majority: 16 and 18. Actually, for film classification, it is 12 and 15. There is an argument for saying that we ought to look at film classification because it is long established and—although the issues are different in many regards—some of them are similar. We might want to learn from that—I say this from my Department for Culture, Media and Sport angle—to inform the debate on this matter.

On enforcement, several Members referred to the fact that there is no point in just changing the law; if we do that but have no form of enforcement, that is worse than useless. That is one of the Government's anxieties, and we need to make sure that the enforcement process works properly. I take the point that there are two areas where Ofcom feels it is unable to act, because the law



[Chris Bryant]

does not allow it to do so, and we will need to look at that. That is why we are keen to get to the moment in April when the two codes will be voted on in Parliament. We will then make sure that Ofcom has not just the powers but the ability to enforce. As my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs Russell) said, Ofcom has the power to fine up to £18 million, or 10% of qualifying worldwide revenue in the relevant year, which could be a substantial amount, but it needs to ensure it is in a legally effective position to do so.

My final point is that the Secretary of State has made it clear that nothing is off the table. We are keen to act in this space. The question is, how do we act most proportionately and effectively in a way that tackles the real problem? Some of that is about how the evidence stacks up, and some of it is about when the right time to legislate is. But, as I said earlier, I do not think for a single instant that this debate or the Online Safety Act will be the end of the story. I would be amazed if there were not further legislation, in some shape or other, in this field in the next two or three years.

With that, I once again thank Kim Campbell for bringing the petition to us, and I thank my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe for introducing the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee.

7.4 pm

**Tony Vaughan:** I thank hon. Members and the Minister for their valuable contributions and explanations. As the hon. Member for Harpenden and Berkhamsted (Victoria Collins) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Sam Rushworth) said, the status quo cannot continue, and I think everyone can agree with that. Several Members also said that we need a cross-party approach to these issues and, again, I think everyone would agree.

Like many others, I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister) for his analysis of the approach we should take to the evidence. The anecdotal and correlational evidence of the effects of social media is known to us all—especially to parents and teachers—and we have heard much of it in the debate, but putting the onus on social media companies to prove that social media is safe, rather than on the regulator to prove that it is not, seems to be common sense, and I was grateful to hear the Minister agree.

Reversing that burden would mean that the social media companies would have to show that the mountain of correlational and anecdotal evidence of harms, which we have all talked about today, is explained by something else, but none of the discussion today has really pointed to what that “something else” could be. Of course, as

the Minister says, there are other things—other material is part of the picture—but it is not good enough for the social media companies to say, as they currently do, “Well, it’s very complicated. You can’t prove that our social media is the problem, so we can get away with doing what we like.”

I was therefore heartened to hear the Minister reiterate that everything remains on the table and that this is the first stage of rolling out what the Online Safety Act seeks to do, but not the end of action on this issue. Whatever the burden, the evidence is evolving and, while we wait, our children are losing out. I am a big supporter of evidence-based policymaking, but we as legislators have to make difficult decisions and difficult judgments on the evidence as it is, imperfect as it may be.

Ultimately, of course, a judgment call will be needed, and we should give weight to the precautionary principle. It is clear that social media is part of the context, even if we cannot say that it is 51% of the cause—or however we want to put it. So it is important to say that if it is part of the context, we should take it out or do something more ambitious. But I accept that, as the Minister explained, we need to put the current mechanism in place so that we can at least see what we are dealing with.

Lastly, I want to comment on the contextual point my hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Patrick Hurley) made about the importance of keeping foreign state actors off our children’s screens. That is, of course, an important point, but I just want to acknowledge a big contextual factor here, without perhaps saying too much about it. I am under no illusion about the power of the social media and tech companies. To take the owner of X, who has a role in the US Government, the regulatory regimes are relevant to his bottom line—I think somebody else said that as well. The issues we are talking about do not only concern us here in Westminster; they may well involve relations with other countries, and how we go about persuading people who we want to help us in different ways to make the very bold changes that may ultimately be needed.

I will end on that because it is one of the most difficult aspects, which is perhaps why it has not been talked about too much today. Nevertheless, let us not worry about the difficulties, because we are all united in the desire to do something about this issue. For me, that is one of the big, important things that has come out of today: we are united in trying to sort it out, so let us all work together and do it.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered e-petition 700086 relating to a minimum age for social media.

7.9 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*

# Written Statements

*Monday 24 February 2025*

## BUSINESS AND TRADE

### Steel Strategy: Consultation

**The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones):** Steel is essential for a modern economy, underpinning sectors from construction to advanced manufacturing and driving growth. It plays a vital role in the communities in which it is situated, supporting jobs and living standards in the UK's industrial heartlands.

The Government are wasting no time in taking action to support the industry. We have simplified public procurement and aligned it with the Government's missions, to put UK firms—including the steel industry—in the best possible position to compete for and win public contracts. That is on top of delivering a better deal for Port Talbot within weeks of taking office, to transform production there and deliver a modern electric arc furnace and implementing the British industry supercharger to cut electricity costs for steel firms, bringing prices more in line with international competitors.

We are committed to rebuilding the UK steel sector and securing the future of the industry, and that is why in spring 2025 we will publish the steel strategy, "The Plan for Steel", which will establish a clear and ambitious long-term vision for the steel industry and set out the actions needed to get there. It will articulate what is needed to create a competitive business environment in the UK, with the aim of attracting new private investment to expand UK steelmaking capability. Our planning reforms will give the industry a strong pipeline of business that will secure supply chains for years to come and drive economic growth as part of our plan for change. This will be backed by up to £2.5 billion, which will be available through the national wealth fund and other routes.

This could benefit regions across the UK—such as Scunthorpe, Rotherham, Redcar, Yorkshire and Port Talbot—that have a strong history of steel production. It will be spent on initiatives that will give the industry a long future, such as supporting the transition to electric arc furnaces, or other improvements in UK capabilities. The strategy will be pursued in alignment with wider Government priorities, including the trade strategy, the strategic defence review and Invest 2035, the upcoming industrial strategy.

On Sunday 16 February 2025, we published a consultation document that sets out our planned approach for the strategy and asks stakeholders for their feedback and evidence on a range of topics, both on the wider direction that the UK steel sector should take and on the detail of the proposed areas of focus for the strategy. This is an important step in developing the strategy for the longer term. This includes issues that we know to be concerns for the industry, such as the price of electricity and the challenging global trading environment, but also areas of new opportunity, such as how best to leverage the UK's abundant supplies of scrap steel and how we can best align our production capabilities with domestic demand. The document also seeks views on funding and financing, which will help inform how best to take

forward our commitment of up to £2.5 billion for the sector. This information will be reviewed as we develop the strategy and will be reflected in the final document when it is launched in spring 2025.

This is just one element of our open and collaborative approach to this work, which had a strong start at the beginning of this year with the first meeting of the Steel Council under this Government. The intention is that the Steel Council, a body of industry experts and representatives, will meet again before the publication of the strategy. I have also had the opportunity to speak to the industry directly—and I will continue to do so—by chairing a series of roundtables addressing specific issues where detailed industry feedback will be vital to inform our approach.

We believe that this is important and timely work. This Government stand by the UK steel sector as it continues to work on finding solutions to those challenges. As the Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my right hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), has set out in the consultation document, the steel industry has an enormous role to play in our mission to drive economic growth, and it is of the utmost importance that the steel strategy is a real driver of meaningful change in the industry. The publication of this consultation, and the insight that we hope to receive from stakeholders, is an important step in achieving that.

Responses to the consultation can be provided by online survey until 30 March.

[HCWS457]

## CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

### Arts and Culture Funding

**The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy):** On 20 February, I announced "arts everywhere"—a package of funding for our cultural sector of over £270 million.

This Government believe that while talent is everywhere, opportunity is not. As part of our plan for change, I am committed to ensuring that arts and culture thrive in every part of the country, with more opportunities for more people to engage, benefit from and work in arts and culture where they live.

Much of this funding will invest in fit-for-purpose cultural infrastructure, so cultural organisations can keep on doing what they do best—providing the public with breathtaking performances, showcasing the best collections and connecting communities to their rich history. The funding I have announced will also preserve increased access to arts and cultural activities for children and young people. This will help ensure that all children and young people, no matter their background, can have a stake in their culture, heritage and creativity and, where there is passion to do so, go on to rewarding creative careers.

I have also set out how, as part of the Government's plan for change, this investment will help kick-start economic growth across the country by improving our cultural offer and attracting tourism to the UK, creating more jobs and opportunities. Together, through investment and reform, we will ensure that our incredible arts and culture sectors continue to thrive for future generations.

The package of funding for 2025-26 I have announced includes:

A new £85 million creative foundations fund, funding urgent capital works to help keep venues across the country up and running;

A fifth round of the popular museum estate and development fund worth £25 million, which will support museums across the country to undertake vital infrastructure projects, and tackle urgent maintenance backlogs;

A fourth round of the libraries improvement fund worth £5.5 million, which will enable public library services across England to upgrade buildings and technology to better respond to changing user needs;

A new £20 million museum renewal fund to invest in cherished local, civic museums, supporting them to expand access to their collections and programmes, to continue serving as trusted custodians of our heritage, sparking national creativity and imagination;

An additional £15 million for heritage at risk, which will provide grants for repairs and conservation to heritage buildings at risk, focusing on those sites with most need with funding weighted towards applications from the most deprived areas;

A new £4.85 million heritage revival fund to transform local heritage buildings. Funding will empower local people to take control of the heritage they love. It will support community organisations to bring neglected heritage buildings back into good use;

Confirmation of the continuation of the £120 million public bodies infrastructure fund to ensure national cultural public bodies are able to address essential works to their estates;

A 5% increase to the budgets of all national museums and galleries to support their financial resilience and to support them in providing access to the national collection;

Confirmation that DCMS will be contributing funding to four cultural education programmes for the next financial year to preserve increased access to arts for children and young people. These will be the museums and schools programme, the heritage schools programme, art and design national Saturday clubs and the BFI Film Academy;

Confirmation of the recipients of the fourth round of the museum estate and development fund, which will see 29 local museums up and down the country receiving a share of almost £25 million to upgrade their buildings.

Alongside this investment, I have confirmed the panel of experts who will be supporting Baroness Margaret Hodge with her independent review of Arts Council England, as well as the scope of the review within the newly agreed terms of reference. The terms of reference and panel of experts can be found on gov.uk.

This month marks the 60th anniversary of the first arts White Paper—“A Policy for the Arts: The First Steps”—published by Jennie Lee, the country’s first Minister for the Arts (1964-70). Her vision for accessibility in the arts is one I am proud to share. Our world-leading arts and culture sectors are an essential part of who we are as a country. They have enormous growth potential to drive our economy forward and through reform and investment we are bulldozing the barriers to growth and unlocking opportunity for all.

[HCWS464]

## EDUCATION

### Early Education and Childcare

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan):** This Government are committed to giving children the best start in life, breaking the link between background and opportunity. We are ensuring

that families in every community across the country can access affordable childcare places that deliver high-quality early education for children.

In our plan for change, we have set a milestone of a record proportion of children starting school ready to learn. We will measure our progress through 75% of five-year-olds reaching a good level of development in the early years foundation stage profile assessment by 2028.

Already in 2025-26, we plan to provide a £2 billion increase in funding for the entitlements compared to 2024-25, to deliver the roll-out of 30 hours of funded childcare from 9 months of age in eligible working families. On top of this, we have announced the largest single uplift to the early years pupil premium since its introduction, increasing the EYPP to £1 per hour in 2025-26, equivalent to up to £570 per eligible child per year. We are investing in quality early education for those children who need it most, in the areas that need it most.

#### *Expansion grant funding*

September 2025 marks a critical stage in the roll-out of the new entitlements when the new childcare entitlements will increase to 30 hours. To support delivery of this key milestone, on top of core funding, we are providing a £75 million expansion grant that will specifically target providers with children who are using the new entitlements. We plan to publish local authority allocations for this grant by the end of the month, and will expect to ask local authorities to confirm provider allocations within 6 weeks of publication.

#### *Clarifying guidance on additional charges*

As we set out in the autumn, we are taking action to protect parents from reported instances of very high additional charges or “top-up” fees on top of their entitlement, ensuring the funded hours remain accessible and affordable for families, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds where it makes the biggest difference. We have therefore updated the statutory guidance on Government-funded entitlements that relates to additional charges, helping local authorities ensure there is clarity and consistency for parents and providers.

The changes also put transparency at the heart of how the entitlement should be passed on to parents, including that all costs should be clear to parents up front and greater clarification of what are considered “consumables” including nappies, suncream and lunch. The guidance also reaffirms, in line with a recent High Court judgment, that while providers can charge for some extras these charges must not be mandatory.

#### *Maths champions and stronger practice hubs*

We are focused on growth, working with the early years sector to meet the challenges of creating the places needed for September 2025, but we will not compromise on quality as we deliver on our plan for change for a record proportion of children starting school ready to learn.

The maths champions programme helps early years educators to support children with core maths skills. This year, staff from 800 early years settings will benefit from the maths champions programme, double the number from the previous year. This evidence-based training is delivered by the National Day Nurseries Association through the Education Endowment Foundation. The EEF evidence of the programme shows that children in settings who had maths champions made the equivalent



of three months' additional progress in maths. The first cohort of this year's settings are starting the programme this month.

Further, we are driving quality early education through the stronger practice hubs programme, with up to £6.1 million in funding for financial year 2025-26. These hubs provide free support and advice to improve quality in early years settings, sharing evidence-informed practice and building lasting local networks.

Together, these latest actions are the next big step in delivering on our plan for change, building a reformed early years system that is sustainable for providers and better serves children and their families.

[HCWS465]

## HOME DEPARTMENT

### UEFA Women's European Championship: Alcohol Licensing

**The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson):** I am pleased to launch a consultation on extending licensing hours in England and Wales for the semi-finals and final of the 2025 UEFA women's European championship this summer, contingent on either the England or Wales women's national football teams playing in the semi-finals, and if any of the aforementioned teams subsequently reach the final of that tournament. The consultation is aimed at members of the public, local licensing authorities, licensed premises and other interested parties in England and Wales where these proposals apply.

Depending on the outcome of the consultation, the Government propose to make a licensing hours order under section 172 of the Licensing Act 2003, which would contingently extend opening hours on the days of the semi-finals, on 22 and/or 23 July 2025, and the final, on 27 July 2025, so that they would end at 1 am—i.e. early in the morning after the matches have taken place, rather than 11 pm on the day of the matches—for the sale of alcohol for consumption on the premises.

The extension would ensure that those wishing to host a viewing of the matches and potential post-match celebrations are able to do so, which would also provide a welcome boost to pubs and other on-trade businesses.

The extension would be contingent on the England and/or Wales national football teams reaching those stages of the championship and would not take effect should neither of these teams reach those stages of the tournament.

I am seeking to use a contingent order to extend licensing hours for the semi-finals and the final to ensure that there is sufficient time to consult publicly on the proposed extension and follow the required parliamentary procedure.

A copy of the consultation will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and published on [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk). The consultation will run until 23 March 2025.

[HCWS459]

### Home Office Exclusion Policy: Russian State

**The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis):** The Government are today announcing an important reform to the Home Office's exclusion policy.

Under new measures, the Home Office will expand the criteria for exclusion to ensure that while Russia remains an acute national security threat to the UK, exclusion from the UK may be considered if the individual is part of an elite linked to the Russian state.

This category will consider any individual who:

- Provides significant support to the Russian state;
- and/or owes their significant status or wealth to the Russian state;
- and/or has access to the highest levels of the Russian state.

The entry of elites linked to the Russian state into the UK may threaten our national security and our national interests. Elites linked to the Russian state may pose a number of specific harms, including but not limited to: acting as tools of influence for the Russian state; opening the UK to accusations of hypocrisy for welcoming these individuals while condemning the actions of the Russian state; and enabling the continuation and expansion of the Russian state's aggression or malign activities.

The UK has been steadfast in its response to Russia's illegal war in Ukraine and to its malign activities in the UK and around the world. We have imposed extensive sanctions on elites linked to the Russian state, strengthened our law enforcement capabilities through the National Crime Agency's combating kleptocracy cell, and closed the legislative loopholes open to money laundering by criminal actors.

Despite these measures, there are members of the elite who continue to travel to the UK while denouncing the west in public life, seeking to enjoy in private the benefits here, which they deprive others of in Russia. The nature of the Russian state, with its lack of rule of law, free media, or delineation between the public and private realms, means that we can no longer rely on existing exclusions measures, such as grounds of corruption or involvement in serious crime to deal with corrupt elites. We must go further to ensure that those who pose a threat to UK interests, because they enable, support or are indebted to the Kremlin regime, are prevented from accessing the UK.

The measures we are introducing today will expand our exclusion criteria to ensure that the most senior and influential individuals linked to the Russian state—whether through financial, political or governmental ties—can be stopped from entering the UK when that is what our interests demand.

Our reforms will:

*Strengthen the criteria for exclusion*—any member of the elite with known links to the Kremlin may be subject to exclusion from the UK.

*Enhance information sharing*—working closely with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office as well as with our operational partners, the Home Office will ensure that exclusion decisions are based on the most robust and up-to-date information available.

*Signal the UK's position on Kremlin-linked elites*—these reforms make clear the Government's view that elites linked to the Russian state are not welcome in the UK.

This policy has been subject to extensive internal and external review. These new measures will not target ordinary Russians, but will focus on those who prop up the Russian regime, wherever they were born. The Government have been clear that we take issue not with the Russian people, but with the actions of their Government.

On the third-year anniversary of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Government remain resolute in our support for Ukraine and in standing with our allies against Russian aggression both at home and abroad. These measures send a clear message: the UK is not a haven for those who enable or profit from the Kremlin regime.

[HCWS458]

**Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures**

**The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis):** Section 19(1) of the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures Act 2011 requires the Secretary of State for the Home Department, my right hon. Friend the Member for Pontefract, Castleford and Knottingley (Yvette Cooper) to report to Parliament as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of every relevant three-month period on the exercise of their TPIM powers under the Act during that period.

The level of information provided will always be subject to slight variations based on operational advice.

TPIM notices in force—as of 30 November 2024	3
Number of new TPIM notices served—during this period	1
TPIM notices in respect of British citizens—as of 30 November 2024	3
TPIM notices extended—during the reporting period	1
TPIM notices revoked—during the reporting period	0
TPIM notices expired—during reporting period	0
TPIM notices revived—during the reporting period	0
Variations made to measures specified in TPIM notices—during the reporting period	3
Applications to vary measures specified in TPIM notices refused—during the reporting period	1
The number of subjects relocated under TPIM legislation—during the reporting period	3

The TPIM Review Group (TRG) keeps every TPIM notice under regular and formal review. TRG meetings were convened on 19 and 22 November 2024.

[HCWS460]

**HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND  
LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

**Local Government Finance**

**The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon):** On 3 February 2025, the Deputy Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) set out the final local government finance settlement for 2025-26. The settlement makes available over £69 billion for local government, which is a 6.8% cash terms increase in councils' core spending power on 2024-25. The settlement reaffirms this Government's commitment to rebuild and reform local government, and to empower local leaders to deliver that change so that the benefits are felt in every community. The additional funding made available in this settlement and the Budget will deliver over £5 billion of new funding for local services over and above local council tax.

The Government are under no illusions about the fragile state of the sector and the pressures councils are facing to deliver for residents. As a result of the 14 years of decline and instability overseen by the previous

Government, we know there are large numbers of councils in significant financial difficulty. Our fiscal inheritance means that there will be tough choices on all sides to get us back on the path to recovery, and it will take time. However, we are committed to restoring stability and bringing forward reform to ensure local government is fit, legal and decent and can play its critical role in providing the services communities rely on. We have already taken steps to improve sector sustainability, including targeting money towards areas with greater need and demand for services and less ability to raise income locally at this year's settlement with the introduction of the new £600 million recovery grant.

The financial legacy of the previous Government has resulted in a record number of councils engaging with the Government asking for exceptional financial support to help them set their budgets. We confirmed in the local government finance settlement that we have already had to consider requests for council tax increases from some councils where this was necessary for their long-term sustainability. As set out in the settlement, we only agreed to this on an exceptional basis, we did not agree to all requests, no request was agreed to in its entirety and we have only permitted additional increases where councils had lower levels of existing council tax compared to similar councils.

The exceptional financial support process has existed since 2020 to support those councils facing unmanageable financial pressures. This Government understand that fragility in the system has left some councils in difficult positions and recognise that support is required in exceptional circumstances to balance budgets. Unlike the previous Government, we have been clear that we do not believe in punishing councils and local residents where this is the case. We are taking a partnership approach to the exceptional financial support process which prioritises protecting the interests of local residents. We have already announced that, where councils deem it necessary to undertake additional borrowing to support their recovery, we will not replicate the previous Government's punitive approach of making that borrowing more expensive through an additional 1% premium.

On 20 February 2025, my Department wrote to 30 councils confirming that we would provide in principle support to enable them to set balanced budgets. The total amount of support provided is circa £1.5 billion, around £1 billion lower than was announced last year. In some cases, requests relate to support in prior years or to reprofiling existing support agreed in previous years.

Details of the councils and support provided were published on [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk). This includes six councils whose improvement is being supported via statutory intervention. We are continuing to work with these councils and through the commissioners and panels in place to support the councils' recovery from more severe financial issues. Support is being provided through financial flexibilities where the Government permit councils, in special circumstances, to treat revenue costs as capital costs. This is known as capitalisation and means councils can then meet those costs through capital receipts, or if necessary, borrowing, in line with the approach of the previous Government. Since capitalisation is a relaxation of normal accounting requirements, it has always been subject to agreement from the Secretary of State.

In taking these decisions, the Government have considered carefully appropriate protections for the public and the public purse—including the protection of treasured community assets. We have set out a clear expectation that where a council is considering financing capitalisation support through capital receipts, this should not be from the disposal of community and heritage assets. Retaining these treasured assets within public ownership is imperative to ensure local communities can continue to benefit from them.

While we are taking a collaborative approach, the Government have been clear on our wider commitment to effective oversight of local government and our expectation that councils deliver value for the taxpayer's pound. That is why we are working to fix the local audit system and strengthen the standards and conduct framework for councils in England. In line with this, as part of our partnership process, we will seek additional external assurance for councils receiving exceptional financial support that will help support local improvement as well as providing an assessment on action each council is taking locally to help manage its position. I am clear that Government will continue to expect councils to make sure they are doing all they can locally to deliver for residents. We will always act where there is any evidence of failure, including in the management of public money.

We are committed to setting a new relationship with the local government sector. As part of this, we will treat all discussions with councils worried about their positions in confidence, with respect and determination to find a solution together. In making these decisions, we are committed to prioritising the needs of residents.

We also want to make sure that councils have the information that they need to conduct their business sensibly. For this reason, the decisions highlighted today were communicated to councils as soon as possible after the House had had the opportunity to consider the local government finance settlement. Given that this was while the House was in recess, we wrote to relevant MPs, the Opposition and the Chairs of the Public Accounts Committee and the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee to inform them of our decisions and confirm that we would make this written ministerial statement once the House returned.

This written ministerial statement applies to England only.

[HCWS461]

## NORTHERN IRELAND

### Independent Monitoring Panel: Internal Market Guarantee

**The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn):** On 19 September 2024, I announced the appointment of Aidan Reilly, Anna Jerzewska and Alastair Hamilton as members of the Independent Monitoring Panel. I would now like to provide an update on how the panel will fulfil its core function, as set out under the “Safeguarding the Union” Command Paper, by scrutinising the performance of the internal market guarantee over six-monthly reporting periods.

I can confirm that, following agreement with the panel, the first six-month reporting period for the internal market guarantee commenced on the 1 January and will conclude on 30 June 2025.

The internal market guarantee relates to movements taking place under the UK internal market system. The guarantee undertakes that more than 80% of all freight movements from Great Britain to Northern Ireland will be treated as “not at risk” of moving onwards to the EU, and therefore moving within the UK internal market. Relevant data will be provided to the panel to support it performing its monitoring functions.

The Government believe that this progress demonstrates our continued commitment to protecting the UK internal market. I look forward to considering the panel's first report later this year.

[HCWS463]

## SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

### AI Security Institute

**The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Peter Kyle):** We recently launched the AI opportunities action plan to create one of the biggest clusters of AI innovation in the world and deliver a new era of prosperity and wealth creation for our country—harnessing AI to deliver on the plan for change.

None of that is possible unless we can mitigate the risks that AI presents. Safeguarding Britain's national security, a key pillar of the Government's plan for change, alongside protecting citizens from crime, will continue to be a driving principle of the UK's approach to the responsible development of AI. That is why I am renaming our AI Safety Institute as the AI Security Institute.

This change of name better reflects the team's essential remit and the priorities that they have always focused on. Their work does not centre on freedom of speech or deciding what counts as bias and discrimination.

My Department addresses these issues in other places. Through the fairness innovation challenge, we are supporting the development of socio-technical solutions to bias and discrimination. And through our work on AI assurance, we are making sure that we adopt this technology safely and responsibly across the economy.

The team at AISI, though, are focused on serious AI risks with security implications, such as how the technology can be used to develop chemical and biological weapons, or to carry out cyberattacks, or to enable crimes such as fraud and child sexual abuse.

To achieve this, the institute will partner across Government, including with the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory—the Ministry of Defence's science and technology organisation—the Laboratory for AI Security Research, and the national security community. That includes building on the expertise of the National Cyber Security Centre, the UK's national technical authority for cyber-security, including AI.

As part of this update, the institute will also launch a new criminal misuse team, which will work jointly with the Home Office to conduct research on a range of crime and security issues that threaten to harm British citizens.

This work is also rooted in the strength of our partnerships with the companies that are at the frontier of AI development. Working with those companies, the Government can conduct scientifically informed tests to understand new AI capabilities and the risks they pose. US companies have led the way in taking security risks seriously, but we need to scrutinise all models regardless



of their jurisdiction of origin. That is why the institute will take a leading role in testing AI models wherever they come from, open or closed. This ground-breaking scientific research will be shared with our allies, demonstrating the UK's commitment to our shared security.

The UK is alive to the security risks of today, but also aware of the risks of tomorrow. The 2025 international AI safety report, led by Yoshua Bengio, warns us that—without the checks and balances of people directing them—we must consider the possibility that risks will not just come from malicious actors misusing AI models, but from the models themselves. We do not yet know the full extent of these risks, but as we deploy AI across our economy, our society and the critical infrastructure that keeps our nation secure, we cannot afford to ignore them. The AI Security Institute will be critical to this mission.

Governments are not passive bystanders in the AI revolution; we have agency in how AI shapes our society. The UK Government have a responsibility to use that agency to defend our democratic way of life. Only countries with a deep and knowing understanding of this technology will be able to build the capacity they need to deliver for their citizens in the 21st century. This depends on the democratic world rallying together to maintain our leadership in AI and protect our fundamental values: freedom, openness and opportunity. This will not only keep our people safe, but ensure that they are the first to benefit from the new era of wealth and prosperity that AI will bring.

[HCWS462]

## TRANSPORT

### Rail Reform

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander):** On Tuesday 18 February, I launched the public consultation for the Government's upcoming railways Bill. This consultation sets out our proposals for the most comprehensive reform of Britain's railways in 30 years, ending decades of fragmentation and inefficiency and delivering a simplified model built from the ground up to serve its users.

Our country needs an efficient, modern railway that kick-starts growth and realises the potential of our towns, cities, and businesses. An affordable, reliable railway brings new markets and job opportunities closer to those who stand ready to make the most of them. It makes education, healthcare, public services, and even just the support of family and friends more accessible to those who need it. A railway that offers a genuine alternative to road travel, combined with a thriving rail freight sector, means cleaner air and less congestion for everyone.

As you are aware, this Government are delivering our plan for change, with investment and reform driving growth, putting more money in people's pockets, and rebuilding Britain. Reforming our railways is central to this and will drive improved performance, bringing more people back to rail, generating greater revenue and reducing costs. This consultation document sets out our vision for the future of Britain's railways, and the transformative changes that are already under way to make it a reality.

Our manifesto commitment to put passengers and communities back at the heart of the railways by establishing Great British Railways is central to achieving this plan. We have already delivered the legislation to bring our

railways back into public ownership, set up shadow GBR, and reset industrial relations with the trade unions. The publication of this consultation marks our next step in fixing the railways once and for all.

The consultation sets out our plans to establish GBR as a new arm's length body, bringing responsibility for train services and rail infrastructure together into one integrated organisation. This means that most passengers will travel on GBR trains, running on GBR tracks, and arrive at GBR stations—all delivered by a single organisation in line with the clear strategic direction set by Government. GBR will be empowered with the expertise and authority to run the railway in the public interest, delivering reliable, affordable, high-quality, and efficient services, alongside ensuring safety and accessibility.

The private sector will continue to play a vital role under the new model on everything from freight and open access services to ticket retailing, rolling stock and the wider supply chain. GBR will leverage the best of both the public and private sectors to unlock growth and drive innovation. GBR will follow fair, efficient and transparent processes when allocating access to the network, with a robust set of protections for third-party operators enshrined in law. There will also be a statutory duty on GBR to promote the use of rail freight, recognising the sector's growth potential and helping to deliver on the Government's commitment to net zero.

GBR will have a new customer-focused culture, ensuring passengers are at the heart of everything it does. This will be reinforced by the establishment of a powerful new independent passenger watchdog that will monitor standards, champion improvements, and ensure that passengers feel they have a clear voice within the industry standing up for them.

A reliable, affordable, and efficient railway is vital to supporting the Government's growth mission—vital not only in connecting people to jobs and opportunities, but also in contributing to the regeneration and integration of local communities. The proposals in this consultation protect and enhance the roles of devolved leaders, both in Scotland and Wales and within England, in shaping how the railway serves their communities. Existing devolution settlements will be protected and devolved leaders will benefit from new statutory roles, drawing on their experiences and expertise to manage, plan and develop a network that delivers for communities. We will continue to work closely with these leaders as we shape this role to ensure the benefits of our reforms are felt across Britain. In addition, established mayoral strategic authorities will have a right to request further rail devolution within England, bringing decision making closer to those who use the railways.

The publication of this consultation marks the next milestone in delivering the legislation needed to transform our railways, unlocking their potential to drive growth and contribute to a decade of national renewal under this Government. We are therefore seeking the views of passengers, freight customers, industry suppliers and experts, and the public at large ahead of the introduction of the railways Bill later in this Session. Only once we have these views can we deliver a system that truly serves its customers, provides better value for hardworking taxpayers, acts as an engine for growth and opportunity, and stands once again as a point of pride for modern Britain.

[HCWS466]

# Petitions

Monday 24 February 2025

## OBSERVATIONS

### HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

#### County Council elections in West Sussex

*The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,*

Declares that the County Council elections meant to take place in May 2025 should not be postponed indefinitely.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that the County Council Elections in West Sussex take place in May 2025.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Jess Brown-Fuller, *Official Report*, 23 January 2025; Vol. 760, c. 1205.]

[P003036]

*Observations from The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon):*

The “English Devolution White Paper” sets out how the Government plan to deliver on our manifesto pledge to transfer power out of Westminster through devolution and to fix the foundations of local government. The Government’s long-term vision is for simpler structures which make it much clearer for residents whom they should look to on local issues, with more strategic decisions to unlock growth and deliver better services for communities. Devolution over a large strategic geography, alongside local government reorganisation, can drive economic growth while delivering optimal public services and beginning to fix the foundations of local government.

On 16 December 2024, I wrote to all councils in two-tier areas of England setting out the Government’s plans for a joint programme of devolution and local government reorganisation. The letter can be accessed online at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/local-government-reorganisation-letter-to-two-tier-areas>.

In that letter, I set out that I had heard from some areas that the timing of elections affects their planning for devolution, particularly alongside reorganisation. I set out that, to help manage these demands, I would consider requests made by 10 January to delay elections. The list of councils that made requests that involve postponing their election from 2025 to 2026 is published at the same webpage as my letter. I also set out that these requests would only be considered where it is clear that postponement will help the area to deliver both reorganisation and devolution to the most ambitious timeframe. This is rightly a high bar to reach, and the Government’s starting point is for elections to go ahead unless there is strong justification.

West Sussex county council submitted, on 10 January, a request to postpone its election. This request was carefully considered against the criteria I have described above, and on 5 February the Deputy Prime Minister

announced our decision to agree requests from nine councils to postpone their May 2025 election to May 2026 only. This included West Sussex. Postponement is essential for the delivery of the devolution priority programme and complementary reorganisation. In the areas where elections are postponed, plans for delivering new combined county authorities, inaugural mayoral elections, and local government reorganisation will all be concurrent and working to a very ambitious timetable.

There is well-established precedent for postponing elections, including in the cases of the North Yorkshire, Cumbria and Somerset elections, and the Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire district council elections, under the previous Government, when reorganisation happened in those areas. Between 2019 and 2022, the Government legislated to postpone 17 local council elections during preparatory local government reorganisation work.

I look forward to working with local leaders in West Sussex on delivering devolution and reform to local government.

## TRANSPORT

### Free 1-hour parking in Yarm

*The petition of the residents of the constituency of Stockton West,*

Declares that Stockton Council must keep Yarm’s free 1-hour parking; further declares that free parking is crucial for supporting local businesses, encouraging footfall, and helping Yarm’s economy thrive; and further notes that the Council’s changes to eliminate 1-hour free parking risks harming small businesses and deterring shoppers.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take immediate action to ensure that the high street in Yarm is supported with free 1-hour parking.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Matt Vickers, *Official Report*, 30 January 2025; Vol. 761, c. 523.]

[P003040]

*Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood):*

Responsibility for traffic management on local roads rests with the relevant local authority, as they are best placed to consider how local needs can be effectively met. It is therefore a matter for individual authorities to decide on the nature and scope of parking policies and to balance the needs of residents, emergency services, local businesses and those who work in and visit the areas.

The objective of local parking policies is not to raise revenue. Section 55 of the Road Traffic Regulations Act 1984 requires any surplus raised from parking schemes to be directed to local authority funded transport or environmental schemes.

Statutory guidance recommends a local authority sets its parking charges as part of meeting its wider parking strategy to meet its network management duty under section 16 of the Traffic Management Act 2004. It also says that parking policies should be proportionate, support town centre prosperity and reconcile competing demands for kerb space.

Private car park owners are free to set their own parking terms and conditions.

Responsibility for setting parking charges on local roads rests with the local authorities who are best placed to balance the needs of residents, emergency services, local business and those who work in and visit the area.

The Minister believes that setting on-street parking charges should remain the responsibility of local authorities in accordance with powers available in the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984 and with their various statutory duties. As well as the level of charges, authorities can also decide how charges are applied, for example differential charges for certain classes of vehicles such as those with diesel engines. Local authorities may also choose to offer preferential rates to zero emission vehicles that, in addition to being cheaper for drivers, benefit the community by reducing greenhouse gas emissions, air pollution, and noise pollution for cleaner, healthier, and quieter streets. The decisions by authorities should reflect the objectives of their local transport plans.

The Secretary of State's statutory guidance to local authorities on the civil enforcement of parking contraventions advocates that parking charges should be proportionate and should not be set at unreasonable levels. It also recommends local authorities review their parking policies regularly, including parking charges, to ensure that they remain fit for purpose. The public and the police should be consulted as part of the appraisal process.

## TREASURY

### Family farm tax

*The petition of residents of Northern Ireland,*

Declares that the government should uphold the Agricultural Property Relief and Business Property Relief on inheritance tax on farms; notes the petition by the Ulster Farmers' Union on this topic with over 15,000 signatures; and further notes the disparity between the DEFRA and DAERA statistics on the number of Northern Ireland farms impacted by this change.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government take immediate action to stop the removal of the Agricultural Property Relief and Business Property Relief on inheritance tax on farms.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Robin Swann, *Official Report*, 28 January 2025; Vol. 761, c. 274.]

[P003037]

*Observations from the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray):*

The Government thank the hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann MP) for submitting the petition on behalf of residents of Northern Ireland regarding the reforms to agricultural property relief and business property relief announced at autumn Budget 2024.

The Government's commitment to farmers and the vital role they play in feeding our nation remains steadfast. The Government recognise the concerns raised by the farming community, including those in Northern Ireland, and UK Government Ministers have met with the Ulster

Farmers' Union since the Budget to listen to their concerns. The Government are aware of the strength of feeling in Northern Ireland and elsewhere.

It is important to understand why this decision was taken, and what it means in practice. This decision was not taken lightly and, despite a tough fiscal context and contrary to the suggestion in the petition that the reliefs are being removed, the Government will maintain very significant levels of relief from inheritance tax beyond what is available to others.

At autumn Budget 2024, the Government took a number of difficult but necessary decisions on tax, welfare, and spending to restore economic stability, fix the public finances, and support public services. These were tough decisions given the situation we inherited from the previous administration, but the Government have done so in a way that makes the tax system fairer and more sustainable.

In 2021-22—the most recent year for which data is available—the median value of assets qualifying for agricultural property relief was £486,000 and three-quarters of estates claimed for agricultural property below £1 million. The data also shows that a very small number of claimants each year claim a very significant amount of relief—40% of the total Exchequer cost of the relief went to the top 7% of claims. It is not fair to maintain such a significant relief for a very small number of claimants, when this money could better be used to fund our public services. This data is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/agricultural-property-relief-and-business-property-relief-reforms>

The general inheritance tax rules remain unchanged. If an individual's estate goes to their surviving spouse or civil partner, it is completely exempt from inheritance tax. When an estate goes to anyone else, there is a £325,000 nil-rate band, which increases to £500,000 where a qualifying residence is left on death to a direct descendant, such as a child. Any unused nil-rate bands are transferred to a surviving spouse or civil partner, which means the qualifying estate of a surviving spouse or civil partner can pass on up to £1 million to a direct descendant without any inheritance tax liability when they pass away.

Agricultural property relief and business property relief are in addition to these general allowances. The reforms announced at autumn Budget 2024, which apply from 6 April 2026, mean the first £1 million of combined agricultural and business assets will not result in any inheritance tax. Above the £1 million allowance, individuals will access 50% relief from inheritance tax and will pay inheritance tax at a reduced effective rate up to 20%, rather than the standard 40%. These tax reliefs can be combined with the general allowances mentioned above, and this means a couple could pass on up to £3 million tax-free between them.

Furthermore, any gifts of assets made more than seven years before death are fully excluded from inheritance tax. Taper relief can also apply in certain circumstances, which reduces the tax payable on gifts made within seven years of death. Where inheritance tax is due, those liable for a charge can in most circumstances pay any liability on the relevant assets over 10 annual instalments, interest-free.

The reforms are expected to result in up to 520 estates across the UK claiming agricultural property relief, including those that also claim business property relief, paying



more inheritance tax in 2026-27. This means almost three-quarters of estates claiming agricultural property relief, including those that also claim for business property relief, would not pay any more tax as a result of the changes in 2026-27, based on the latest available data. More detail on the Government's estimates are available in a letter from the Chancellor of the Exchequer to the Chair of the Treasury Select Committee in November 2024, which is available at

<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/45691/documents/226235/default/>

The Government are aware of the analysis undertaken by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs in relation to the potential impacts in Northern Ireland of the reforms to these reliefs. However, the Government remain firmly of the view that claims data is the correct way to understand an inheritance tax liability. The Government's analysis of the number of estates across the UK expected to be affected by reforms

is underpinned by that data. The Government were also asked recently to respond to several questions from the Northern Ireland Select Committee about these reforms, including in relation to DAERA's analysis. The response to the Committee can be found at

<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/46267/documents/232537/default/>

In summary, the Government understand the concerns raised in the petition, but believe our approach gets the balance right between supporting farms and fixing the public finances in a fair way. The reforms reduce the inheritance tax advantages available to owners of agricultural and business assets, but still mean those assets will be taxed at a much lower effective rate than most other assets. Despite a tough fiscal context, the Government will maintain very significant levels of relief from inheritance tax beyond what is available to others and compared with the position before 1992.



## Written Correction

*Monday 24 February 2025*

### Ministerial Correction

#### TRANSPORT

#### Electric Vehicles

*The following extract is from the debate on Electric Vehicles on 13 February 2025.*

**Lilian Greenwood:** Last year, the UK was the largest market in Europe—in fact, in the world—for EV vehicles.

[*Official Report*, 13 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 380.]

*Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood):*

**Lilian Greenwood:** Last year, **the UK was the largest market in Europe** for EV vehicles.





# ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 24 February 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
<b>HOME DEPARTMENT</b> .....	485	<b>HOME DEPARTMENT—continued</b>	
Antisocial Behaviour .....	487	Indefinite Leave to Remain.....	486
Asylum Seekers: Hotels .....	497	Phone Theft .....	498
Consumer Protection: Fraud .....	485	Police Funding: Gloucestershire .....	492
Counter-terrorism .....	493	Retail Crime .....	494
Domestic Abuse: Gloucester.....	489	Rural Crime .....	496
Drug Dealing: Rural Communities.....	492	Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking .....	490
Hostile State Threats .....	498	Topical Questions .....	499

# WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Monday 24 February 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
<b>BUSINESS AND TRADE</b> .....	37WS	<b>HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND</b>	
Steel Strategy: Consultation.....	37WS	<b>LOCAL GOVERNMENT</b> .....	43WS
		Local Government Finance .....	43WS
<b>CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT</b> .....	38WS		
Arts and Culture Funding .....	38WS	<b>NORTHERN IRELAND</b> .....	45WS
<b>EDUCATION</b> .....	39WS	Independent Monitoring Panel: Internal Market	
Early Education and Childcare.....	39WS	Guarantee.....	45WS
<b>HOME DEPARTMENT</b> .....	41WS	<b>SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY ..</b>	46WS
Home Office Exclusion Policy: Russian State.....	41WS	AI Security Institute .....	46WS
Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures.	43WS		
UEFA Women's European Championship:		<b>TRANSPORT</b> .....	47WS
Alcohol Licensing .....	41WS	Rail Reform .....	47WS

# PETITIONS

Monday 24 February 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
<b>HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND</b>		<b>TREASURY</b> .....	5P
<b>LOCAL GOVERNMENT</b> .....	3P	Family farm tax .....	5P
County Council elections in West Sussex .....	3P		
<b>TRANSPORT</b> .....	4P		
Free 1-hour parking in Yarm.....	4P		

# WRITTEN CORRECTIONS

Monday 24 February 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
<b>MINISTERIAL CORRECTION</b> .....	9WC	<b>MINISTERIAL CORRECTION—continued</b>	
Transport .....	9WC	Electric Vehicles.....	9WC

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## CONTENTS

**Monday 24 February 2025**

**Speaker's Statement [Col. 485]**

**Royal Assent [Col. 485]**

**Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 485] [see index inside back page]**  
*Secretary of State for the Home Department*

**Plant Oxford Site [Col. 507]**  
*Answer to urgent question—(Sarah Jones)*

**Ukraine [Col. 513]**  
*Statement—(David Lammy)*

**Breakfast Clubs: Early Adopters [Col. 535]**  
*Statement—(Bridget Phillipson)*

**Points of Order [Col. 554]**

**Crown Estate Bill [Lords] [Col. 555]**  
*As amended, considered; read the Third time and passed*

**Bank Closures: Rural Areas [Col. 598]**  
*Debate on motion for Adjournment*

**Westminster Hall**  
**Social Media Use: Minimum Age [Col. 253WH]**  
*E-petition debate*

**Written Statements [Col. 37WS]**

**Petitions [Col. 3P]**  
*Observations*

**Written Correction [Col. 9WC]**  
*Ministerial correction*

**Ministerial Correction [Col. 9WC]**

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