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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 25 February 2025

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Palestinians in Gaza: US Policy

1. **Neil Duncan-Jordan** (Poole) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential implications for his policies of President Trump's proposal to move Palestinians from Gaza to neighbouring Arab states. [902800]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): We do not support forced displacement of Palestinians or any reduction in the territory of the Gaza strip. Palestinians must be able to live and prosper in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. That is why it is essential that we work together to ensure that all aspects of the ceasefire are implemented and that it becomes permanent.

Neil Duncan-Jordan: It is very sad that the past month has marked a new and horrifying phase in the long history of attempts to ethnically cleanse the Palestinian people from their homeland. President Trump's recent comments calling for Palestinians to be expelled from their homes in Gaza, in order for the US to take over the land, along with his failure to rule out Israeli annexation of the west bank, constitute the most explicit denial of the Palestinian people's right to self-determination by any US Administration to date. Will the Foreign Secretary therefore condemn President Trump's remarks and set out what action the UK Government are taking to prevent further forced displacement of the Palestinian people?

Mr Lammy: This House has watched with horror the loss of life in the Gaza strip particularly and the plight of the hostages held in bunkers under Gaza. The US played a pivotal role, and all credit should go to President Trump for brokering that negotiated ceasefire agreement. I am thankful for the role that the Israeli Government, Qatar and Egypt played in getting to that ceasefire. It is our belief, and this is a cross-party belief, that there should be a negotiated two-state solution: a sovereign Palestinian state, which includes, of course, the west bank and Gaza, alongside a safe and secure Israel.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I have just been out in the middle east with the Conservative Friends of Israel—I put that on the record before I ask my question.

Given Emily Damari's personal testimony to the Prime Minister that she was held at United Nations Relief and Works Agency facilities in Gaza during the conflict, and that her captors refused her access to medical treatment, does the Foreign Secretary stand by the Government's decision to restart sending UK taxpayers' money to UNRWA when Hamas terrorists were holding British hostages at its facilities, and when it has been crystal clear for months that UNRWA had many members of Hamas in its ranks, including people involved in the 7 October terrorist attacks, who have held hostages ever since?

Mr Lammy: I think we were all pleased to see Emily Damari emerge; of course, we have been in touch with the Damari family. As the right hon. Gentleman would expect, we have also been in touch with UNRWA—the Minister for Development raised this issue with Mr Lazzarini directly—which has instigated an investigation.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): The Israeli forces are now using the same tactics in the west bank as they used in Gaza: the forced displacement of communities and the use of heavy weapons against civilians. What is the Government's response, both to Israel and to the UN? Is it not time that we responded to the advisory opinion?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend raises a serious issue. As I have said repeatedly from the Dispatch Box, I condemn the expansion and the violence that we have seen over the last period, and I reject the calls for the annexation of the west bank. I met Tom Fletcher of the UN recently to discuss these very same issues, and renewed our commitment to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs—that humanitarian work is important. Of course, at this time I have been in touch with the Israelis and with Prime Minister Mustafa as we discuss these issues together.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Back on 17 October 2023, when the first hospital in Palestine was bombed, the al-Ahli Arab hospital, much conversation was had about who could have committed such a heinous crime. Since then, the Israeli army has destroyed all medical facilities in Gaza, and now we have a President of the United States using gangster-style intimidation to forcibly remove Palestinian people from their land. Will the Foreign Secretary—who has repeatedly refused to call out the Israeli Government for the war crimes they are committing, refused to ban all arms sales, refused to acknowledge that a genocide is happening and refused even to consider economic sanctions, because £6.1 billion is too high a price to pay—accept the reality of the situation and accept that Trump and Netanyahu's plan proposes ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people in Gaza?

Mr Speaker: We are well under time, but I just need to get other Members in.

Mr Lammy: We are in the first phase of a ceasefire that we want to hold and go to phase 2. That is the issue I was discussing with Arab leaders last week at the Munich security conference. The Quint group are working with President Trump to get to that third phase and the governance issues that will be so important, with the Palestinian Authority involved in Gaza.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): My thoughts continue to be with the hostages held in Gaza and the appalling suffering they and their families are facing. The world has seen the brutality inflicted by the Iranian-sponsored terrorists, Hamas, who are a major obstacle to bringing about a sustainable and just peace in the middle east. The Foreign Secretary has previously agreed that there cannot be any future whatsoever for Hamas controlling Gaza. Can he provide an update on the actions he has undertaken to put an end to Hamas control and ensure we get to the third phase of the ceasefire? Will he discuss this issue when he goes to America with the Prime Minister to meet the President of the United States?

Mr Lammy: I can confirm that I discussed this issue with Ron Dermer from the Israeli Government last week. I discussed this issue with Arab leaders—the so-called Quint—the week before. In the end, we cannot have a Gaza run by Hamas. All roads lead back to Hamas. I think the world has looked with horror at the scenes of armed men wearing bandanas, seeming to glorify murder and hostages who have been held. Of course, we will act with international colleagues to make sure that Hamas have no role to play in the future of Gaza.

Tackling HIV and AIDS

2. **Paul Davies** (Colne Valley) (Lab): What progress his Department has made on tackling HIV and AIDS globally. [902801]

The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds): Investments in the Global Fund, Unitaid, UNAIDS—the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS—the World Health Organisation and others have helped to cut new HIV infections by 60% since 1995 and AIDS-related deaths by 69% since 2004. I was pleased to meet HIV-positive activists in Parliament recently and to be videoed while undertaking a quick and easy HIV test. Together, we can eradicate HIV/AIDS.

Paul Davies: The Minister is aware that PEPFAR—the US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief—is the largest and most successful global health programme and has saved 25 million lives. It has been advised that freezing PEPFAR will result in 228,000 fewer HIV tests being carried out daily. UNAIDS predicts that 6.3 million AIDS-related deaths will occur if PEPFAR lacks funding for the next five years. Can the Minister ensure that the Foreign Office includes HIV in all international discussions, especially at the G7 in Canada this year?

Anneliese Dodds: Tests and treatment are critical. I am pleased that the Prime Minister recently announced that, together with South Africa, the UK will co-host the eighth replenishment of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. The Global Fund is the leading financier of the global fight against HIV/AIDS, and we will work with Canada to draw attention at the G7 to the importance of the Global Fund replenishment.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): What details can the Minister give us about the financing that will be given to the Global Fund? More importantly, there is a rumour that official development assistance is going to

be cut from 0.5% to 0.2%, to cover an increase in defence spending. Can the Minister confirm whether that is the case?

Anneliese Dodds: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the importance of funding for global health. Of course, this is not just important for those directly impacted; it is important for us here in our country, because we know that diseases do not respect borders. I set out a few moments ago the fact that the Prime Minister is committed to that Global Fund replenishment, and rightly so.

British Virgin Islands: Illicit Finance

3. **Lloyd Hatton** (South Dorset) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of steps taken by the British Virgin Islands to tackle illicit finance. [902802]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): The overseas territories, including the British Virgin Islands, work to uphold international standards on tax transparency and illicit finance and enforce UK sanctions. The overseas territories agreed to implement corporate registers that are accessible at least to those with legitimate interest by June 2025. We are aware of BVI's public consultation on its register and are working with it to improve its proposal.

Lloyd Hatton: The BVI will soon close the consultation on its proposal to grant only limited access to a register of beneficial ownership. That proposal means that it will be virtually impossible for even a select few to trace those using the BVI as a place to secretly stash their cash, and this comes some five years after the first deadline to set up a register was missed. I know that the Secretary of State agrees that sunlight is the best disinfectant when it comes to combating illicit finance, so what steps is he taking to ensure that the BVI establishes a genuine and fully transparent register of beneficial ownership?

Mr Lammy: The BVI committed at the Joint Ministerial Council to improving access to its corporate register by June. I met BVI representatives just after that time at the end of last year, and my hon. Friend the Minister of State will meet the BVI again in the coming weeks. It is important that that public consultation on the proposed register will close this Friday, and we are working with the BVI to improve its proposal.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The Foreign Secretary will be aware that under the Sanctions and Anti-Money Laundering Act 2018, the British Virgin Islands is obliged to introduce open registers of beneficial ownership by the end of 2020, or be subject to an Order in Council. It has not done so, it is in contempt of Parliament, so when will the Foreign Secretary issue the Order in Council?

Mr Lammy: I say to the right hon. Gentleman that if the agreed requirements are not met we will carefully consider what further steps to take. Our expectation remains clear: those registers will ultimately be public, and my hon. Friend the Minister of State will meet the BVI to make clear our expectations.

Illegal Israeli Settler Violence

5. **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of sanctioning violent illegal Israeli settlers. [902805]

23. **Anna Sabine** (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of sanctioning violent illegal Israeli settlers. [902824]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): Settler violence is unacceptable. On 15 October the UK sanctioned three outposts and four entities linked to violence in the west bank under the global human rights regime. Those measures will help bring accountability to those who have supported and perpetrated such heinous abuses of human rights. The Government do not comment on future sanctions measures, as to do so would reduce their impact.

Wera Hobhouse: Comments made yesterday by the UN Secretary-General about increasing violence in the west bank by Israeli settlers have shocked my Bath constituents and people across the country, and Members across the House are frustrated by the lack of action. Will the Government sanction those who advocate for that violence, especially Minister Smotrich and former Minister Ben-Gvir?

Mr Falconer: We have condemned the unacceptable language that has been used by Israeli Minister Bezalel Smotrich and former Minister Mr Ben-Gvir. The Foreign Secretary, and all Ministers, have been clear with their Israeli counterparts that the Israeli Government must clamp down on settler violence, as the Foreign Secretary said earlier, and end the settlement expansion. As I said in my original answer, we will not comment on future sanctions, as to do so could reduce their impact.

Anna Sabine: Many people in my constituency are passionate about resolving the situation between Israel and Palestine, and there are concerns that violence in the west bank has increased and illegal settlements have continued to expand. Does the Minister agree that if he also wants to see a reduction in settler violence, we should be considering sanctioning those settlements?

Mr Falconer: I am seriously concerned by the expansion of Israel's operations in the west bank, and 40,000 Palestinians have reportedly been displaced. Palestinians must be allowed home, civilians must be protected, and the destruction of civilian infrastructure minimised. Stability is essential at this crucial time. We recognise Israel's security concerns, but it must show restraint and ensure that its operations are commensurate with the threat posed. I refer to my previous answer on sanctions.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Israel has sent tanks to the west bank for the first time in 20 years, and some 40,000 Palestinians are being displaced from refugee camps there. The very least that should be done to stop these contraventions of international law is to impose a ban on Israeli goods coming from illegal Israeli settlements, so I ask the Minister: is it now the time to do that?

Mr Falconer: We call for trade to be done in the proper way. There are clear provisions around where Israeli goods are produced. We do not recognise illegal settlements. Produce must be properly labelled and there is clear advice to business on that basis.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): The Government and their partners are doing important work to support the continuation of the fragile ceasefire in Gaza, but in the west bank, as well as increased settler attacks we have seen Israeli forces attack a Palestinian bookshop in east Jerusalem, UNRWA schools closed, tanks moving into refugee camps and the forced displacement of some 40,000 Palestinians. What action are the Government taking to prevent the Gaza-isation of the west bank?

Mr Falconer: As I said in my previous answer, we are following events in the west bank closely. Stability in the west bank is crucial to ensuring that the fragile ceasefire in Gaza can last. All sides should work to ensure a lowering of tension in the west bank at this time. It is in no one's interest for further conflict and instability to spread in the west bank.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): A week ago, I was in a Palestinian village with colleagues, including the hon. Member for Rochdale (Paul Waugh). We went to a school that had been demolished by illegal settlers. Immediately, two punks turned up with sub-machine guns, intimidating us—that is happening all over the place. We went to Hebron. It is completely closed down. This is appalling. The whole House should unite against the extremist Jewish settlers and the illegal settlements, because it is not in the interest of moderate Israeli opinion. It is directly contrary to peace and we must fight this. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

Mr Falconer: The Father of the House, my constituency neighbour, can hear the strong support for his remarks from Members on the Government Benches.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): As the Father of the House just referenced, I was in Israel, on the west bank, last week, and two things became instantly clear. There was widespread revulsion at the sickening desecration of the bodies of the Israeli hostages by Hamas, and there was widespread fear among Palestinians, particularly those in rural areas whom we met, who had first-hand experience of their children having stones thrown at them by settlers, their neighbours having their cars torched and their own windcreens being smashed every night. Will the Minister reassure us that those extremist settlers will be dealt with really thoroughly in our foreign policy?

Mr Falconer: My hon. Friend sets out some of the horrific scenes that have come out of Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories in recent weeks. I restate our opposition to a further expansion of extremist settler violence and illegal settlement.

UK-Mauritius Treaty

6. **Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): What assessment he has made of the potential security implications of the proposed UK-Mauritius treaty on the sovereignty of the British Indian Ocean Territory. [902806]

13. **Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Reform): What his planned timetable is for the transfer of sovereignty of the Chagos islands to Mauritius. [902814]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): We remain committed to concluding a deal that protects the base on Diego Garcia. Without a deal, the base cannot operate in practical terms as it should in its important role protecting the security of this country, the United States and our allies. We are currently discussing the agreement with the US and Mauritius. We will not put a deadline on its finalisation, and will come to the House in due course.

Mr Mohindra: The Labour party's determination to give away vital strategic territory in the Chagos islands, seemingly to satisfy one of the Prime Minister's lawyer friends over our American allies, is baffling to my colleagues on the Conservative Benches. Does the Minister agree that it is far more important to maintain our special relationship with the US and the new Trump Administration than to pay billions of pounds in the face of the self-inflicted, worsening domestic economic situation, in order to give the Chinese Government access to that vital region?

Stephen Doughty: There are so many things in the hon. Gentleman's question that I disagree with that I do not know quite where to start. We are not giving away the base on Diego Garcia—the deal secures that base. If there was not a problem with its operation and its future, why did his Government start negotiations on it?

Lee Anderson: The Minister will be aware that the Chinese have a smart city situated in Mauritius, so what safeguards are in the deal to prevent Chinese installations on Diego Garcia that could compromise our western naval security?

Stephen Doughty: We are absolutely clear that we will retain full control over Diego Garcia, and will have robust provisions to keep adversaries out. There will be unrestricted access to and use of the base for the UK and the US, a buffer zone around Diego Garcia, a comprehensive mechanism to ensure that no activity in the outer islands threatens base operations and a ban on the presence of any foreign security forces. I absolutely assure the hon. Gentleman that the provisions are in place to defend the security of that critical base.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): The Foreign Secretary has proudly said that his Chagos surrender plan was a good deal. He told the Foreign Affairs Committee back in November that it was "a very good deal", and that he was

"confident that the Mauritians are still sure about that".

Three weeks ago, the Prime Minister of Mauritius told his National Assembly that since his election, he had concluded the deal

"was so bad that we said, no way!"

and that he had extracted more concessions from the UK on the length of the lease, the extension on sovereignty and the cost. Can the Minister confirm that changes have been made since the announcement of the deal on 3 October last year, and does he disagree with the account given by the Prime Minister of Mauritius?

Stephen Doughty: The fundamentals of the deal remain the same, and the overall quantum remains unchanged.

Women and Girls: Afghanistan

7. **Rebecca Smith** (South West Devon) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support women and girls' rights in Afghanistan. [902807]

The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds): We condemn the Taliban's appalling treatment of women and girls in Afghanistan. The Taliban must reverse their barbaric decrees, and we keep working hard with international partners to maintain collective pressure.

Rebecca Smith: The cruelty and inhumanity of the Taliban should appal us all, and no doubt we all condemn the ban on medical training. The UK has provided significant aid to Afghanistan to support the health of women and babies, but with the Taliban now undermining women's health as well as their rights, what will happen to these aid programmes and funds? What actions can we take to put pressure on the Taliban to reverse their decision?

Anneliese Dodds: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that the Taliban have been undermining so much of women's and girls' lives in Afghanistan. We are determined to support girls in Afghanistan, including when it comes to education. I have directly discussed that with the Aga Khan Foundation to ensure that support is getting directly to girls, but we also need to push hard politically. I was very pleased to announce that the UK is politically supporting the initiative to refer Afghanistan to the International Court of Justice for violations of the convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): The treatment of women and girls by the Taliban is disgusting, and pressure must be exerted in response. The Minister will know that there are concerns about the protection of rights for women and girls and other minorities in Syria too, given the ideology of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. Ministers have issued a statement on the future of the UK sanctions on Syria. Can the Minister give details of the measures that need to be put in place in Syria to protect those rights, and say whether such issues will be tied to future decisions on sanctions?

Anneliese Dodds: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for her question, and for her passion for the protection of women and girls. Protecting them, and, indeed, religious and ethnic minorities, has been at the core of the UK's engagement with the Syrian authorities. It was at the core of the interventions I made at the conference

on Syria that I attended in Paris just a few days ago, and it is also very important in relation to the changes to sanctions that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary set out.

Europe: Diplomatic Co-operation

8. **Freddie van Mierlo** (Henley and Thame) (LD): What steps he is taking to increase diplomatic co-operation with his European counterparts. [902808]

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, the Minister for the Cabinet Office and I are engaging extensively with European counterparts, including through the Prime Minister's attendance of a European Council meeting for the first time since Brexit. We are working closely with European allies, and are calling for increased defence spending and support for Ukraine. This deeper engagement has already delivered results on growth and security, including a landmark defence and migration agreement with Germany.

Freddie van Mierlo: The Thames valley is one of the most important economic zones in this country. At a recent meeting that I held with the business leaders of the Thames Valley chamber of commerce, the overwhelming message was that Brexit has been a disaster for business, and that Boris Johnson and the Tories did them dirty. Will the Minister commit to correcting that wrong, and start negotiations to join a European Union customs union?

Stephen Doughty: We have been very clear that we do not seek to rejoin the customs union, but our co-operation is already delivering results, particularly in relation to growth and business. We recently secured a £250 million Czech investment in Rolls-Royce small modular nuclear reactors, and a further £600 million investment by Polish firm InPost in its UK operations, and as I have said, we have also signed deals on migration with Serbia, Kosovo, Slovenia and Slovakia.

Fred Thomas (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab): Ceasefire talks between Russia and Ukraine are under way, whatever our opinion of them, but the eager eye of Putin may now look to other former Soviet countries, such as the Baltic states. I was in Estonia a couple of weeks ago, and the distance between the Russian border and the Russian-held Kaliningrad territory is just 300 miles. For context, that is roughly what I travel every week to Plymouth from London. What steps are the Government taking to deter the Russians from looking at possible future military action there?

Stephen Doughty: As I have said, security is at the heart of our engagement with European counterparts, and the UK's commitment to the security of the Baltic states is iron-clad. We are helping to uphold that region's security through our NATO forward land forces deployment in Estonia—the Prime Minister met joint expeditionary force leaders in Tallinn in December to discuss closer co-operation, in response to both conventional threats from Russian aggression and hybrid threats—and, of course, our work together on Ukraine. I have visited that border and met our enhanced forward presence

troops there; they are doing an excellent job, and it is crucial that we stand with our Baltic neighbours and all of Europe when it comes to our collective security.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): The UK can be proud of the leadership it has shown in supporting Ukraine and rallying our international partners around this cause. What work is the Minister leading, with European allies, on unfreezing sanctioned assets, so that they can be used to equip Ukraine, and what is his timeframe for releasing critical sanctioned funds, so that they can be used to strengthen Europe's defence of our values, security and defence?

Stephen Doughty: As the right hon. Lady knows, we have already done important work with European partners to secure the extraordinary revenue acceleration loan, which will make a tangible difference to Ukraine. We continue to work with European partners on sanctions, and of course, we are considering all lawful options going forward. We have had important discussions in the Weimar group and through the G7, and will continue to look, with European counterparts, at all options for supporting Ukraine.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): It was shocking yesterday to see the United States vote with the despots of North Korea, Belarus and Russia against a UN resolution proposed by the UK and other European democracies. Liberal Democrats want to see the UK lead in Europe against Putin's war on Ukraine, so we were pleased to hear the Foreign Secretary say yesterday that he was taking forward our Liberal Democrat proposal that the £40 billion of frozen Russian assets held in European central banks be seized and given to Ukraine. Can the Minister confirm that the Foreign Secretary will push the US Administration to join in that initiative when he visits Washington later this week?

Stephen Doughty: I am genuinely glad of the continued cross-party co-operation on Ukraine, which we saw during the Foreign Secretary's statement yesterday. Of course, that includes getting important resources. I am not quite sure that the proposal was a Liberal Democrat proposal, but I think there is a united front across this House on getting Ukraine the resources that it needs. We will continue to work with European counterparts in support of Ukraine at the United Nations, across Europe and through NATO, using all the means that we can to support Ukraine militarily, economically and diplomatically.

Georgia: Civil Liberties

9. **Perran Moon** (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support civil liberties in Georgia. [902810]

Mr Speaker: Who wants it?

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Minister, well done.

Stephen Doughty: Apologies, Mr Speaker. I am answering a lot of questions today.

I have significant concerns about the Georgian authorities' violent crackdown on peaceful demonstrators and journalists, which is completely unacceptable. In response, we have suspended programme support to the Georgian Government, restricted defence co-operation, and limited engagement with Georgian Dream. We have imposed visa bans and sanctions on some of those responsible for the violence, and we continue to work with international partners to support a free and open civil society and media in Georgia.

Perran Moon: Meur ras, Mr Speaker. Last month at the Council of Europe, I met several Georgian opposition members, who showed me graphic evidence of the brutal physical abuse meted out by the Georgian regime before, during and since the recent parliamentary elections. Bidzina Ivanishvili, the Putin-backed oligarch and de facto ruler of Georgia, continues to suppress peaceful protest, using an identical modus operandi to that used in Russia. Violence and intimidation are distorting the political process. The United States has imposed sanctions on Ivanishvili, but much of his wealth is based in the UK or in British overseas territories. Will the Minister commit to the UK joining our allies and freezing the assets of such a despicable tyrant?

Stephen Doughty: I thank my hon. Friend and his fellow members of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe delegation for the important work that they are doing, including on the issue of Georgia. It is hugely important that we stand together with fellow Europeans in the Council of Europe on these matters. In co-ordination with the US, the United Kingdom has imposed sanctions on the Minister and deputy Minister of Internal Affairs and three police chiefs responsible for violent attacks against journalists and peaceful protesters in Georgia. My hon. Friend will understand that while we continue to closely monitor the evolving situation in Georgia, we do not comment on potential sanctions designations, as to do so would lessen their impact.

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): The European Parliament recently recognised Salome Zourabichvili as the rightful President of Georgia. Protesters who are on the streets of Tbilisi day in, day out, agree with that view. She has met the President of France, Emmanuel Macron, and she attended the recent inauguration of the US President. Will the Minister commit to meeting with Madame Zourabichvili the next time she visits the UK?

Stephen Doughty: We continue to engage with a range of figures in Georgia. We continue to engage with all those who seek a Euro-Atlantic path for Georgia, which is defined in its constitution and is the wish of its people. We will continue to work closely with European counterparts on the issue.

Historic Slavery: Reparations

10. **Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab):** Whether he has had recent discussions with his international counterparts on the payment of reparations to people impacted by historic slavery. [902811]

The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds): The slave trade was abhorrent. We recognise its horrific impacts and the ongoing strength of feeling, but there have been no such discussions. As the Foreign Secretary made clear to the Foreign Affairs Committee after the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting,

“There was no discussion about reparation and money. The Prime Minister and I were absolutely clear that we will not be making cash transfers and payments to the Caribbean”.

We are focused on working with our Caribbean partners to tackle the most pressuring challenges of today and the future, including security, growth and climate change.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: Last week saw the 38th ordinary session of the African Union Assembly of Heads of State and Government, the topic of which was “Justice for Africans and people of African descent through reparations”. Caribbean Heads of State were also present, and we know that the Caribbean Community, or CARICOM, has long engaged in discussions on reparative justice. Whether or not we participate in these discussions, they will continue to happen. Does the Minister accept that the world and its power structures are changing? In our turbulent post-Brexit reality, we need allies and friends, but we will not even say that we are sorry. We would be foolish to think that we are not deeply resented for that. Is it not better for the UK to engage in these discussions and ensure that we play a constructive role in addressing the enduring legacies of slavery and colonialism?

Anneliese Dodds: We recognise that this is an issue of enduring concern to many. We listen to views from our Caribbean partners on the full range of bilateral issues, but our policy on reparations is clear: we do not pay them. We are determined to work together for the future.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): A quick question: to what extent do the Government support CARICOM's 10-point plan for reparatory justice?

Anneliese Dodds: As I just stated, our policy on reparations is clear: we do not pay them.

Conflict in Sudan

11. **Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op):** What steps he is taking with his international counterparts to help de-escalate the conflict in Sudan. [902812]

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): Ending the conflict in Sudan is a personal priority for me. I recently visited the Adré border with the Chadian Foreign Minister to increase international attention on Sudan, and to meet Sudanese civilians who are bearing the brunt of this crisis. I am happy to announce that I will convene Foreign Ministers in London in April, around the second anniversary of the outbreak of the civil war in Sudan, to foster international consensus on a path to ending the conflict.

Rachael Maskell: I thank the Foreign Secretary for all that he is doing. As in so many conflicts, the discourse about this brutal Sudanese war is being fuelled by external actors with economic and mineral interests in

Sudan, and with interests in wider geopolitical agitation, such as Russia; Egypt, with its support for the Sudanese Armed Forces; and the UAE, with its support for the Rapid Support Forces. There is also the wider user of mercenaries. What further steps can the Foreign Secretary take to use our leverage, not least our trading leverage, to ensure that actors are not fuelling this horrendous war and humanitarian crisis?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend will be pleased to hear that I raised these issues in my contribution at the G20. I had a lengthy discussion with Amina Mohammed of the United Nations, with the Foreign Minister of Angola, and with President Ramaphosa on the situation in Sudan. I am looking forward to convening this conference in London, and working with the French and the African Union. We continue to emphasise, with all international partners, the importance of refraining from actions that prolong the conflict.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Foreign Secretary indicated that he would engage in further discussions, along with the African Union. Given that there are about 9 million displaced people in one of the most significant, if not the most significant, humanitarian catastrophes that the world faces today, will he impress on the African Union and partners the need for urgent action to try to resolve this situation?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman is right to ask that question. I went to the Adré crossing not just to spend time with the overwhelming number of women and children who are fleeing the conflict, but to announce £20 million in additional support for refugees and, in particular, for access to reproductive and sexual health services on that border. The situation is grim; it is horrific, and has been given too little attention, and I intend to ensure that we do all we can to bring it to an end.

Gaza: Humanitarian Situation

12. **Andrew Pakes** (Peterborough) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help tackle the humanitarian situation in Gaza. [902813]

The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds): On 28 January we announced a further £17 million for healthcare, food and shelter, and to support vital infrastructure across the Occupied Palestinian Territories. This was an investment in the ceasefire, which must hold.

Andrew Pakes: It is utterly heartbreaking to see the desecration of hostages' bodies, and to see men, women and children returning to Gaza to try to rebuild their lives among the rubble. I welcome the Government's efforts on humanitarian aid during this fragile ceasefire, which is becoming more fragile as tanks roll into the west bank. What more can we do to ensure that the ceasefire is implemented in full, and to protect human rights and communities in the west bank?

Anneliese Dodds: I know that many Members on both sides of the House will share my hon. Friend's revulsion and concern at those scenes. We are committed to working with Israel, the Palestinian Authority, the

United States and regional partners to build confidence in the ceasefire and support conditions for a permanent and sustainable peace, including Palestinian reconstruction. To support immediate needs, £2 million of the recently announced funding has been committed to critical water and energy infrastructure projects.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I visited Israel recently as part of a delegation from this place, and met politicians from across the political spectrum. Some support the Israeli Government's current approach, while others do not, but what unites them is their criticism of the UK Government's continued support for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency. Will the Government please reconsider that support?

Anneliese Dodds: I too have had such discussions, both in Tel Aviv and elsewhere. I recognise that there was particular concern about the events that led to the production of the Colonna report. As was mentioned earlier, there were disturbing allegations about the involvement of UNRWA staff, and there is also concern about reports that Emily Damari may have been placed within an UNRWA camp. We have taken this up with UNRWA, and have supported its reform agenda. It has delivered change, and it is the only organisation that can deliver the humanitarian support that is so desperately needed by millions of Palestinians.

Sudan

14. **Kate Osamor** (Edmonton and Winchmore Hill) (Lab/Co-op): What steps he is taking to help tackle the humanitarian situation in Sudan. [902815]

16. **Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): What steps his Department is taking to support people affected by the humanitarian situation in Sudan. [902817]

21. **Afzal Khan** (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to help tackle food insecurity in Sudan. [902822]

The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds): We remain desperately concerned about the humanitarian situation in Sudan. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has set out the measures taken by the UK to seek to ameliorate that appalling disaster, included a doubling of aid to Sudan.

Kate Osamor: In recent days, Sudanese armed forces have advanced into El-Obeid, the capital of North Kordofan state, ending a two-year siege by the Rapid Support Forces. This has caused serious food shortages in North Kordofan, which is deemed to be suffering famine conditions under the integrated food security phase classification. What are the Government doing to ensure that aid is fast-tracked into the city?

Anneliese Dodds: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue, because the situation she has described is intolerable. I was grateful to the international counterparts who attended a discussion on these subjects, in which we took part, at the Munich security conference. My hon. Friend referred to the famine designation. We

regret the fact that the Sudanese armed forces have said that they will not co-operate with that assessment, but we have seen both the RSF and the SAF restricting aid and using it as a weapon of war, and that must end.

Munira Wilson: The Genocide80Twenty campaign group at Hampton school in my constituency recently met members of the Darfur diaspora who have fled the atrocities in Sudan, and they would like to know what the UK Government are doing to help those targeted simply for who they are. With a staggering 16 million children desperately needing food, shelter, healthcare and education, could I ask the Minister for assurances that we will not see any cuts to UK aid to the region, and what assessment has she made of the impact of the Trump Administration's cuts to US aid?

Anneliese Dodds: The hon. Member is right to raise the disturbing accounts of atrocities that we have heard. She will be pleased to know that the UK led efforts to renew the UN Human Rights Council fact-finding mission mandate last October, and I was very pleased to see additional African countries coming on board with that. We have doubled our aid to Sudan, so that commitment is not in doubt.

Afzal Khan: I welcome the Government pushing a ceasefire in Sudan and doubling aid. Sudan's civil war, now in its third year, has triggered one of the worst humanitarian crises of the decade, with 5.1 million internally displaced people and 1.3 million refugees since April 2023, and famine is now looming. Given this, will the Minister outline what urgent steps the Government are taking with their international counterparts to help de-escalate the conflict in Sudan?

Anneliese Dodds: Ending the conflict in Sudan, and the appalling consequences of it, is a UK priority. Both the Foreign Secretary and I have visited the region, including Chad and South Sudan. We have increased aid, and we have been determined to increase international attention. That includes the April conference to which the Foreign Secretary referred, but I also convened Development Ministers from a number of countries a few days ago, with the emergency relief co-ordinator, to try to pile on the pressure.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): The last time the Minister was in the House talking about Sudan, she told us it was important to have trust in the international system. Given that the RSF are accused of ethnic cleansing and genocide, are so far acting with complete impunity and have just pledged to form a rival Government, what are the UK Government doing to garner trust in the international system and to hold the RSF to account?

Anneliese Dodds: I regret that we see both parties to the conflict behaving in a manner that is having a truly catastrophic impact on civilians—we see famine and appalling levels of conflict-related sexual violence—and the international community must step up. That is why the Foreign Secretary is seeking to convene leaders on this in April, why I have pulled together Development Ministers on this and why we have repeatedly raised these issues at the UN.

Sri Lanka

15. **Mr Paul Kohler** (Wimbledon) (LD): If he will take diplomatic steps to help ensure accountability for alleged war crimes in Sri Lanka. [902816]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West): The UK Government are committed to human rights in Sri Lanka and are leading international efforts to promote accountability and human rights, including at the UN Human Rights Council. In a visit to Sri Lanka last month, I raised these issues with Ministers in the new Government in Colombo.

Mr Kohler: It is over 15 years since the end of the bloody civil war in Sri Lanka, but those responsible for the many war crimes committed during that conflict, including the targeting of civilians and sexual violence, have still not been held accountable. In opposition, the Foreign Secretary called on the Government to follow the example of our allies, including the US and Canada, in imposing sanctions against individuals suspected of committing these appalling acts. Now he is in government, will he commit to finally doing so?

Catherine West: In October 2024, the UK and our core group partners got a resolution on Sri Lanka in the UN Human Rights Council, outlining just what the hon. Member says. It renewed the mandate of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to report regularly on Sri Lanka, and to protect and preserve evidence to use in future accountability processes. We consider a range of justice and accountability options, including sanctions, and keep evidence for any potential designations under close review.

Topical Questions

T1. [902826] **Alison Bennett** (Mid Sussex) (LD): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr David Lammy): As I set out in the House yesterday, securing a lasting peace that safeguards Ukraine's sovereignty for the long term is essential. To achieve this, Europe and the United States must provide the support Ukraine needs to stay strong, and Ukraine must be at the heart of any talks. The UK is playing a leading role on assistance to Ukraine, on pressure on Russia and on keeping our allies united.

Alison Bennett: Will the Government bring forward emergency legislation to seize frozen Russian assets and ensure they are repurposed to support Ukraine in the wake of Trump's talks with Putin? If not, can the Foreign Secretary explain why?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Lady raises an important issue. It is not something on which any Government can act alone; we must act with European allies. It was a topic of conversation at the G7 and at the Weimar group. Of course, Europe has to act quickly, and I believe we should move from freezing assets to seizing assets.

T2. [902827] **Joe Morris** (Hexham) (Lab): The Gaza ceasefire deal remains fragile and, as we enter the final week of its first phase, it is crucial that both the Israeli and Palestinian Governments continue to uphold the

agreement and reunite families with dignity. Will the Minister assure me that this Government will continue to support the ceasefire deal into its remaining stages and work with international partners such as Jordan and Egypt to secure a lasting peace?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): I can confirm that we will continue to support the ceasefire deal through all three of its phases, which we hope to see concluded in full. I am working with international partners, as are other Ministers; I saw the Jordanian and Egyptian ambassadors on this question just last week.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): This House stands united with the people of Ukraine. In the light of Putin's brutality towards the people of Ukraine, what discussions will the Foreign Secretary be having with allies, including his American counterpart, on the international effort to prosecute Russia for the invasion of Ukraine and the sheer barbarism it has inflicted on the people of Ukraine?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for raising the issue of justice and accountability. As she knows, this work was begun under the previous Government, when we led the world in ensuring there were sufficient funds in Ukraine. The Foreign Office supports lawyers working in Ukraine to gather evidence; I will never forget the scenes that I saw in Bucha and the victims I stood with. The UK will not let up on justice. When it comes to accountability, Putin should pay—not the British and European people.

Priti Patel: Russia, Iran and China all pose threats to Britain, and they go out of their way to do us harm. Can the Foreign Secretary explain why the Government have yet to implement the foreign influence registration scheme, which the previous Government legislated for, and can he confirm when it will come in and whether China will be on the enhanced tier?

Mr Lammy: Again, the right hon. Lady raises an important issue. We inherited a process that was not quite working; she knows of the issues. We will come forward shortly with our plans for the foreign influence registration scheme.

T3. [902829] **Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab):** The International Court of Justice delivered its advisory opinion last July, in which it made crystal clear that the illegal settlements at that time were just that—unlawful. Yet we have seen threats to displace Gazans and tanks on the west bank. When will the Government deliver their response to the advisory opinion? Will it be before the conference in Switzerland in a few weeks?

Mr Falconer: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question and for her long commitment to these issues. As I made clear in the Westminster Hall debate on 12 February, the UK respects the independence of the ICJ, and we are considering the court's advisory opinion with the rigour and seriousness it deserves. We remain clear that Israel should bring an end to its presence in

the Occupied Palestinian Territories as rapidly as possible, while making every effort to create the conditions for negotiations towards a two-state solution.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): The whole House will be shocked to learn the worrying news that the mother of British-Egyptian political prisoner Alaa Abd el-Fattah, Laila Soueif, was admitted to St Thomas' hospital last night. She is 68 years old and has been on hunger strike now for 149 days. Will the Foreign Secretary update us on whether the Prime Minister has spoken to the Egyptian President to secure the release of Alaa Abd el-Fattah and allow Laila to break her strike?

Mr Falconer: The whole House is engaged in this case, and we are all hoping for Laila's health. The Prime Minister recently met Laila and the rest of her family—a meeting I was pleased to join—and has undertaken to make every effort to ensure Alaa's release. We will continue to do so.

T4. [902831] **Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab):** On a recent visit to Camp Viking, I witnessed the vital role that this hub for UK commando forces in the high north plays in our strategic defence efforts. What engagement has the Minister had with our Norwegian counterparts to counter Russian aggression and strengthen our collective security in the region?

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): I am delighted that my hon. Friend has visited those incredible commandos during their training. I, too, have visited our Royal Marines and Army commandos in the high north in Norway and witnessed the vital role that they play in our strategic defence efforts. The UK and Norway work closely together as NATO and joint expeditionary force allies. Our Prime Minister signed a strategic partnership agreement in December, and, last week, the Defence Secretary visited Norway to launch a new agreement on deeper defence co-operation. I and the Foreign Secretary have also visited our counterparts, and I can tell my hon. Friend that security and defence co-operation were absolutely at the heart of our efforts and discussions with our Norwegian friends.

T6. [902833] **Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD):** President Trump and Elon Musk slashing US aid was a great day for Russia and China. Will the Foreign Secretary avoid giving them another great day by committing to protect the UK's development budget, even as we raise defence spending to 2.5% of GDP? As he knows, preventing wars is cheaper than fighting them.

Mr Lammy: I am proud of the work that the UK has done over many decades in relation to development: the work that I have seen in Ukraine, in Gaza and in Sudan. All of that work will, of course, continue.

T5. [902832] **Fred Thomas (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab):** The security of Europe is absolutely paramount. What new steps is the Secretary of State taking to deter Russia from further invading European borders given that we are now in a new situation of ongoing negotiations?

Mr Lammy: I was very pleased yesterday to announce one of this country's biggest ever sanctions packages, which will bear down further on Russia's shadow fleet. I remind my hon. Friend that interest rates are running at 21% in Russia and inflation is running at 9%. We are doing a lot to take off the table money that Putin uses to fund his war machine.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): In January, a Minister in the Foreign Office said that they would challenge the Northern Ireland Executive to be more robust in their reporting of international affairs and meetings. At the start of this month, the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister met again with the Chinese consul, but still no details of that meeting or previous meetings have been reported or shared. Has that challenge been made, and what was the response?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West): We regularly engage with Northern Ireland on all matters of foreign policy. However, this Chinese consular matter is not something that Ministers can discuss at the Dispatch Box.

T7. [902834] **Joe Powell** (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): I warmly welcome the massive sanctions package announced yesterday by the Government, but does the Foreign Secretary agree that China should be taking a significantly more proactive role in preventing its companies from supplying Russia's military?

Stephen Doughty: I thank my hon. Friend for his praise and support for the action that the Foreign Secretary has just mentioned. This was our largest ever sanctions package since the start of Russia's illegal and barbarous invasion. We and our G7 allies are absolutely clear on the principle that Russia must pay for the damage that it is causing to Ukraine, and we of course look at third country routes by which support is being given to Russia's illegal actions in Ukraine. As part of the package announced yesterday we are taking a number of steps in that regard, including with companies in China.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): Last week, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), left open the possibility that the FCDO might revisit the issue of explicit carbon monoxide warnings on FCDO travel advisory pages—a change that we contend would have a cascading effect on the UK travel industry, drive up the use of carbon monoxide alarms and save lives of British travellers overseas. May I encourage the Front-Bench team to pick up this

issue in the name of my constituent, Hudson Foley, to ensure that the lives of British travellers overseas are kept safe?

Mr Falconer: I can confirm that I will be adding information to our dedicated page for independent travellers to highlight the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning globally. I shall be writing to Cathy Foley, who I was moved to meet, and to the hon. Member.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): Gaza's healthcare system has been devastated, and many civilians are in desperate need of treatment and specialist care, which is not available in Gaza itself. Will the Minister ensure that the Government continue to raise with Israel the importance of allowing safe passage out of Gaza for those children in need of urgent medical treatment? Will they consider additional evacuation routes for critically unwell children?

The Minister for Development (Anneliese Dodds): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that important question. We have been working closely with Egypt, which has sought to support many of those requiring medical assistance. Across Government we continue to look carefully at this issue, but Gazans need healthcare support in Gaza, and the UK Government have been supporting that.

Mr James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): As I am sure those on the Treasury Bench know, soft power and diplomacy are most effective when they are backed up by hard power. When will the Government commit to spending 3% of GDP on defence, to make sure that we have a real voice at the international table to encourage European countries to increase their defence spending?

Mr Lammy: Why did the right hon. Gentleman not decide to do that? The Conservatives left it to this Government to get back to 2.5%, which we last had under a Labour Government. The right hon. Gentleman should have done it, and we are going to do it.

Sadik Al-Hassan (North Somerset) (Lab): I look forward to seeing relations between the UK and Iraq blossom in the years to come under this Labour Government. Will the Minister share the recent conversations that he has had with Iraqi counterparts on reducing barriers to trade, such as diverging trade regimes?

Mr Falconer: I was very pleased to meet the Iraqi Foreign Minister Dr Fuad Hussein during the official visit of Prime Minister Al Sudani to the UK from 14 to 16 January. During that visit our two Prime Ministers signed the landmark partnership and co-operation agreement, a wide-ranging treaty on trade and strategic co-operation, and announced a trade package worth up to £12.3 billion.

Defence and Security

Mr Speaker: Before the Prime Minister's statement, let me point out that the Government's own ministerial code says that the text of statements should be provided in advance to the Opposition and the Speaker. It does not provide for the text to be redacted. I am particularly concerned by reports that some of the redacted information was provided to the media in advance. If correct, that is very discourteous to this House, and I take it very seriously. It could well have been leaked, in which case I hope that there will be an inquiry into what has happened. I ask the Prime Minister to look into what has happened and to report back to me and to the House as soon as possible.

12.33 pm

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): Let me begin by giving my word to this House that the statement was not given to the media. I will absolutely have an inquiry into that. I spoke to you, Mr Speaker, this morning. I would not be discourteous to you, the Leader of the Opposition or the House in that way. I give you that assurance from this Dispatch Box. I apologise to the Leader of the Opposition, and I will have that inquiry.

Three years since Russia launched its vile assault on Ukraine, I would like to address the international situation and the implications for Britain's national security. In my first week as Prime Minister, I travelled to the NATO summit in Washington with a simple message: NATO and our allies could trust that this Government would fulfil Britain's and, indeed, the Labour party's, historic role of putting our collective security first. I spoke of my great pride in leading the party that was a founding member of NATO, the inheritor of the legacy of Clement Attlee and Ernest Bevin, who not only stood behind Winston Churchill in wartime, but won the peace by establishing the great post-war order here and abroad.

It is a proud legacy, but in a world like ours it is also a heavy one, because the historical load that we must carry to fulfil our duty is not as light as it once was. We must bend our backs across this House, because these times demand a united Britain and we must deploy all our resources to achieve security.

Mr Speaker, as a young man, I vividly remember the Berlin Wall coming down. It felt as if we were casting off the shackles of history; a continent united by freedom and democracy. If you had told me then that in my lifetime we would see Russian tanks rolling into European cities again, I would not have believed you. Yet here we are in a world where everything has changed, because three years ago that is exactly what happened.

Britain can be proud of our response. British families opened their doors to fleeing Ukrainians, with the yellow and light blue fluttering on town halls and churches the length and breadth of the country. The Conservatives in government were robust in our response. I supported that in opposition and I applaud them for it now. We have built on that, bringing our support for Ukraine to a record level this year.

We should not pretend that any of this has been easy. Working people have already felt the cost of Russian actions through rising prices and bills. None the less, one of the great lessons of our history is that instability

in Europe will always wash up on our shores and that tyrants like Putin only respond to strength. Russia is a menace in our waters, in our airspace and on our streets. It has launched cyber-attacks on our NHS and—only seven years ago—a chemical weapons attack on the streets of Salisbury.

We must stand by Ukraine, because if we do not achieve a lasting peace the economic instability and the threats to our security will only grow. And so, as the nature of that conflict changes, as it has in recent weeks, it brings our response into sharper focus; a new era that we must meet—as we have so often in the past—together and with strength.

The fundamentals of British strategy are unchanged. I know that the current moment is volatile, but there is still no good reason why they cannot endure, so let me now spell out to the House exactly how we will renew them for these times. First, NATO is the bedrock of our security and will remain so. It has brought peace for 75 years. It is as important today as the day on which it was founded. Putin thought he would weaken NATO; he has achieved the exact opposite. It remains the organisation that receives the vast bulk of our defence effort in every domain, and that must continue.

Secondly, we must reject any false choice between our allies—between one side of the Atlantic and the other. That is against our history, country and party, because it is against our fundamental national interest. The US is our most important bilateral alliance. It straddles everything from nuclear technology to NATO, Five Eyes, AUKUS and beyond. It has survived countless external challenges in the past. We have fought wars together. We are the closest partners in trade, growth and security.

So this week, when I meet President Trump, I will be clear. I want this relationship to go from strength to strength. But strength in this world also depends on a new alliance with Europe. As I said in Paris last week, our commitment to European defence and security is unwavering, but now is the time to deepen it. We will find new ways to work together on our collective interests and threats, protecting our borders, bringing our companies together and seeking out new opportunities for growth.

Thirdly, we seek peace not conflict, and we believe in the power of diplomacy to deliver that end. That of course is most pressing in Ukraine. Nobody in this House or this country wants the bloodshed to continue—nobody. I have seen the devastation in Ukraine at first hand. What you see in places such as Bucha never leaves you. But for peace to endure in Ukraine and beyond, we need deterrence. I know that this House will endorse the principle of winning peace through strength, so we will continue to stand behind the people of Ukraine. We must ensure that they negotiate their future, and we will continue to put them in the strongest position for a lasting peace.

Fourthly, we must change our national security posture, because a generational challenge requires a generational response. That will demand some extremely difficult and painful choices, and through those choices, as hard as they are, we must also seek unity—a whole-society effort that will reach into the lives, the industries and the homes of the British people. I started this statement by recalling the era of Attlee and Bevin, and this year we will mark many anniversaries of that greatest generation. We must find courage in our history and courage in

[The Prime Minister]

who we are as a nation, because courage is what our own era now demands of us. So, starting today, this Government will begin the biggest sustained increase in defence spending since the end of the cold war. We will deliver our commitment to spend 2.5% of GDP on defence, but we will bring it forward so that we reach that level in 2027 and we will maintain that for the rest of this Parliament. Let me spell that out. That means spending £13.4 billion more on defence every year from 2027.

However, we also face enemies that are sophisticated in cyber-attacks, sabotage and even assassination, so our intelligence and security services are an increasingly vital part of protecting both us and our allies. On top of the funding of 2.5% that I have just announced, we will recognise the incredible contribution of our intelligence and security services to the defence of our nation, which means that, taken together, we will be spending 2.6% on our defence from 2027.

We must go further still. I have long argued that in the face of ongoing and generational challenges, all European allies must step up and do more for our own defence. Subject to economic and fiscal conditions, and aligned with our strategic and operational needs, we will also set a clear ambition for defence spending to rise to 3% of GDP in the next Parliament.

I want to be very clear: the nature of warfare has changed significantly. That is clear from the battlefield in Ukraine, so we must modernise and reform our capabilities as we invest. I equally want to be very clear that, like any other investment we make, we must seek value for money. That is why we are putting in place a new defence reform and efficiency plan, jointly led by my right hon. Friends the Chancellor and the Defence Secretary.

This investment means that the UK will strengthen its position as a leader in NATO and in the collective defence of our continent, and we should welcome that role. It is good for our national security. It is also good for this Government's defining mission to restore growth to our economy, and we should be optimistic about what it can deliver in those terms. But, in the short term, it can only be funded through hard choices. In this case, that means we will cut our spending on development assistance, moving from 0.5% of GNI today to 0.3% in 2027, fully funding our increased investment in defence.

I want to be clear to the House that this is not an announcement that I am happy to make. I am proud of our pioneering record on overseas development, and we will continue to play a key humanitarian role in Sudan, Ukraine and Gaza, tackling climate change and supporting multinational efforts on global health and challenges like vaccination. In recent years, the development budget was redirected towards asylum backlogs, paying for hotels, so as we are clearing that backlog at a record pace, there are efficiencies that will reduce the need to cut spending on our overseas programmes. None the less, it remains a cut, and I will not pretend otherwise. We will do everything we can to return to a world where that is not the case and to rebuild a capability on development. But at times like this, the defence and security of the British people must always come first. That is the No. 1 priority of this Government.

But it is not just about spending; our whole approach to national security must now change. We will have to ask British industry, British universities, British businesses and the British people to play a bigger part, and to use this to renew the social contract of our nation—the rights and responsibilities that we owe one another. The first test of our defence policy is of course whether it keeps our country safe, but the second should be whether it improves the conditions of the British people. Does it help provide the economic security that working people need? Because, ultimately, as Attlee and Bevin knew, that is fundamental to national security as well. We will use this investment as an opportunity. We will translate defence spending into British growth, British jobs, British skills and British innovation. We will use the full powers of the Procurement Act 2023 to rebuild our industrial base.

As the strategic defence review is well under way, and across Government we are conducting a number of other reviews relevant to national security, it is obvious that those reviews must pull together. So before the NATO summit in June we will publish a single national security strategy and bring it to this House, because, as I said earlier, that is how we must meet the threats of our age: together and with strength—a new approach to defence, a revival of our industrial base, a deepening of our alliances; the instruments of our national power brought together; creating opportunity, assuring our allies and delivering security for our country.

Mr Speaker, at moments like these in our past, Britain has stood up to be counted. It has come together. And it has demonstrated strength. That is what the security of our country needs now, and it is what this Government will deliver. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

12.48 pm

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for the partial copy of his statement. Now that I have heard the unredacted bits, I must welcome his response and his fulsome support for Ukraine.

This weekend marked a grim milestone: it is now three years since Putin's invasion. The Conservative party stands resolutely with the people of Ukraine. Our hearts are with those still caught up in this conflict as we remember the many innocent lives lost. I will always be proud of the support that the last Conservative Government gave in the run-up to Putin's invasion, and in the first crucial weeks and months of the war. We helped prevent Kyiv from falling and we supported Ukraine in regaining territory initially lost to Russia. But it is also true that, overall, the west has not done enough to support Ukraine.

As has been the case from the outset, it ultimately remains for Ukraine, as a proud and sovereign nation that has sacrificed so much to defend itself and the fundamental freedoms that we all hold dear, to decide its future. We want this terrible war to end, but Ukraine needs to be at the negotiating table. Like President Zelenskyy, we hope for a lasting, reliable peace, but the west must continue to be intensely robust in the face of Putin's aggression. The lesson of the past 20 years is clear: he only comes back for more.

The first duty of every Government is to protect their people. That means a strong state that stands up for our national interest. Our foreign policy should seek to support our national interest, which should always come first, so I am very pleased to hear the Prime Minister announce the increase to 2.5% by 2027. All of us on the Conservative Benches welcome that; we have all wanted to see more spending on defence. On the inclusion of the intelligence budget, will the Prime Minister confirm whether that means new money for the intelligence services? Does it mean that there will be new money in the next financial year?

The Prime Minister will know that I wrote to him at the weekend with suggestions on what we can do to help increase defence spending, so I welcome his announcement on repurposing money from the overseas development budget—that is absolutely right—and I look forward to him taking up my other suggestion of considering what we can do on welfare. He will know that we had a fully funded plan, and we urge him to take it up.

Having said that, can the Prime Minister say with confidence that 2.5% by 2027 is sufficient? We need to look at exactly how we fund this. He must not raise taxes further, as that would destroy our economy, and we need a strong economy to pay for strong defence. He cannot borrow more; we are already spending more on debt interest than on defence. We all know that he must make difficult decisions on spending, and he has our support in doing that.

In his statement, the Prime Minister also told us about his new value-for-money defence reform and efficiency plan. Does he agree that the first thing that must be looked at is the spending of billions of pounds of taxpayer money to lease back the defence base on Diego Garcia, which we currently own? Why is he still pursuing that deal? Earlier today, I made a speech about the realism that should drive our foreign policy. As part of that, he must scrap his disastrous plan to surrender the Chagos islands and have British taxpayers pay for the privilege.

The key difference between we Conservatives and the Labour party is that we know that we need a strong economy for defence. We need a serious plan to get the British economy growing again. We do not have that with the latest Budget from the Chancellor. Will the Prime Minister tell us whether there will be a fiscal event this spring, even though his Government are committed to only one fiscal event per year?

In summary, the Prime Minister made four points. I agree with him that NATO is a bedrock of our security, as I said this morning, and that the US is our most important bilateral relationship, but friends tell each other when they disagree. We agree on this issue; we know that Ukraine must be supported, and I share his concern about statements that have been made about President Zelensky. I agree with him about protecting security in Europe, and I welcome his continued strengthening of alliances, but we must do that through NATO, building on the joint expeditionary force approach. Of course, we agree that we need peace, with Ukraine agreed.

I do not necessarily agree with the Prime Minister's change of the national security posture, because we have different views on that—I am a Conservative realist, not a progressive internationalist—but I want him to know that when he does the right thing, we will work with him in the national interest.

The Prime Minister: May I first thank the Leader of the Opposition for her support in relation to today's announcement and on Ukraine? That is important to the Government, to the House and, most of all, to the Ukrainians and President Zelensky. They want to see unity in our House—they value unity in our House—as they enter, after three years of conflict, a very difficult stage in the war with Russia and against Russian aggression. I hope and believe that we can maintain that unity in relation to Ukraine, as we have done for three years. I am very proud that this House has done that, notwithstanding a change of Government, for three long years—we will continue to do so.

The Leader of the Oppositions asks about the money for defence, security and intelligence. There was new money in the Budget in relation to that, but what I am doing here is in addition to the 2.5%, which is the increased defence spend as it has always been understood, to recognise that the nature of the threats to our country are different now, and that the security and intelligence services play a key part for us and our allies in our defence. That takes the total to 2.6%.

The Leader of the Opposition asks whether we will tax or borrow to pay for the 2.5%. The answer is no, which is why I have today set out precisely how we will pay for it, pound for pound. That has meant a difficult decision on overseas development—a very difficult decision, and not one that I wanted or am happy to take. But it is important that we explain where the money will come from in terms and today. I was only ever going to come to the House with a plan that had a timeline and a percentage in it, and an answer to the question, “How will you pay for it?” I would not have come to the House with a fanciful plan.

The Leader of the Opposition says that they had a plan—[*Interruption.*] She says, “Of course we did.” I have my views on that, but the Institute for Government said that the Conservatives' pledge of 2.5% by 2030 did “not add up” and was “not a serious plan.” The Institute for Fiscal Studies called it “misleading and opaque”. I am not giving my view; I am giving the view of other bodies on the plan that the Conservatives put forward. They said that they would fund it by cutting the civil service, and then increased the civil service by 13,000. I am not prepared to operate in that way, which is why we have taken the difficult decision on overseas development today, to be absolutely clear on where the money is coming from.

In relation to the Leader of the Opposition's final point on the approach that we take here and whether there is a difference between us, I hope not. What I have set out was NATO-first, as the bedrock of our security. I hope that is common ground, whatever we may call our respective positions. I also set out that we must not choose between the US and our European allies. That is what I fundamentally believe, and I will resist that choice. I hope that is common ground between us, notwithstanding the language that she uses, because it is important, not for exchanges over the Dispatch Boxes, but for the future defence and security of our country and of Europe.

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

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement on defence and security, because times are a-changing and we must all recognise

[*Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi*]

that these are pivotal moments not just for our nation's security but for our Ukrainian friends, whom we must wholeheartedly support in their fight for survival.

In my various interactions with key stakeholders in my role as Chair of the Defence Committee, I have begun to realise that there is considerable consternation among our European allies about whether long-established and hard-earned alliances—rather than a short-term transactional approach—can still be relied on to secure lasting peace. Also, given the proposed reduction in the American presence on our continent, people are looking for leadership. I feel that this is our time to step forward as a nation and take the lead on defence and security matters on our continent.

Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister convey to President Trump and our American allies the anxieties of our European allies and the need to strengthen our transatlantic NATO alliance at this perilous time for Europe, and does he agree that he can be the person to take the lead on defence and security matters in Europe, coalescing with our NATO allies?

Mr Speaker: Order. I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that I know he has a lot to say, but I have a lot of Members to get in, including other party leaders.

The Prime Minister: I do agree that our alliances are important, and that is why NATO is the bedrock of our approach. It has been for many, many years and will continue to be. I do accept that European allies and the UK have to step up and do more. In our heart of hearts, I think across this House we have known that this moment was coming for the last three years. We have put that plan before the House, and of course, I will do everything I can to strengthen the alliance and the relationship between the US and the UK. It is a special relationship. It is a strong relationship. I want it to go from strength to strength.

Mr Speaker: I call the leader of the Liberal Democrats.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I thank the Prime Minister for advance sight of his statement. Three years ago, Putin began his brutal full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and as we watched Russian missiles rain down on Ukrainian cities, we feared he might have struck a decisive blow to Ukraine and its sovereignty, yet Putin underestimated the strength of the ideals we share with our Ukrainian friends of democracy, truth and liberty. He underestimated the courage and grit of Ukrainian soldiers, who have spent three years heroically resisting Putin's war machine.

Britain stood together with our allies in support of Ukraine, and families up and down the country opened their doors wide for Ukrainian refugees, because we know that Ukraine's fight for democracy and liberty is our fight, too. In this House, we stood strong together, and yet three years on, the future of Ukraine and security in Europe seems even more perilous. Then, Washington was clearly on our side, but now, the United States is voting with Russia, Belarus and North Korea in the United Nations. President Trump labels President Zelensky a "dictator", but not Vladimir Putin.

After the second world war, Britain came together with allies around the world to establish NATO and, with America, agreed to underwrite security on this continent, recognising that a threat to the security of one nation was a threat to the security of all nations. The events of the past few days are clear: that era is over. We may be watching before our very eyes the betrayal of our Ukrainian allies by America, and with it, the potential betrayal of Europe and of Britain, too. We must respond. Now it is up to the United Kingdom to lead in Europe. As a nation, we must seize this moment.

It is for our national interest that Liberal Democrats have supported the Prime Minister's proposals on Ukraine, including British troops joining a reassurance mission in Ukraine if a just settlement is reached. That is why we strongly support the Prime Minister raising defence spending to 2.5%, preferably using seized Russian assets to pay for extra defence support for Ukraine. We will scrutinise all aspects of the Government's spending plans carefully, but I hope that moving at pace to 2.5% means that Ministers will shortly announce the reversal of the Conservatives' short-sighted cut of 10,000 troops from our armed forces.

The Prime Minister is right: we must go further, so will he initiate talks between all parties in this House to establish the vital consensus needed to take us to spending 3% of GDP on defence as soon as possible? The Prime Minister will know that for months, we Liberal Democrats have urged the Government to seize frozen Russian assets, which amount to over £20 billion, and repurpose those funds for Ukraine's defence. Will he take immediate steps to gather European leaders and begin the seizure of Russian assets, so that we can support Ukraine no matter what America does? Will he, on his trip to Washington, try to persuade President Trump to do the same—to make Russia pay?

The Prime Minister will know that the whole country will be willing him on, hoping that he might be able to persuade Donald Trump to change his mind on Ukraine. We on the Liberal Democrat Benches think he is right to try, but should that not work, will he be clear where the United Kingdom then stands? Will he make it clear that, if absolutely necessary, it will be with Ukraine and our European allies, not Putin and Trump?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his support on Ukraine; it has been steadfast, and it has been across this House. For the same reasons that I gave to the Leader of the Opposition, that is important not just here but to those in Ukraine.

We do need to step up and lead in Europe—we have been saying that for a very long time. All European countries need to do more, and now is the moment to do so, but we need to do that together with the US, because what is needed more than anything is a lasting peace. A ceasefire that simply gives Putin the chance to regroup and to go again is in nobody's interest. A lasting peace means that we must talk about issues such as security guarantees. We are prepared to play our part, as I have indicated, but I have also indicated that to be a security guarantee, it requires a US backstop—US support for that security guarantee. That is at the heart of the case I have been making for some time.

As the right hon. Gentleman knows, of the assets that have been seized already, the interest on those of £3 billion has already been committed to Ukraine, and

we are working with our European allies to see what more can be done in relation to the funding that will be necessary. Stepping up means stepping up on capability, on co-ordination and on funding, which is what we have done today with this statement.

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

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I warmly welcome the Prime Minister's statement and this strong commitment to defence spending. I welcome as well the work being done with the Chancellor and the Defence Secretary on ensuring that we get as much value as we can for each pound spent on delivering capability. Will the Prime Minister reaffirm his commitment to the parliamentary scrutiny of that spending, including on the most sensitive areas?

The Prime Minister: Yes, of course; it is extremely important, and my hon. Friend knows that well. She is absolutely right to say that we must get value for money. This is a huge increase in defence spending. It is very important that it is used on the right capabilities in the right way, and that is why we intend to get a much better grip on the money that will be put in.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's announcement. I personally think it is a start, not a finish—I think we will find that we have to raise defence spending further—but I welcome it none the less, and on behalf of all of this House and my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch), I will support it.

The Prime Minister is due to go to Washington. One problem we have there is that they seem to have reached the conclusion that peace is simply the absence of war. Can he remind the President that a peace without justice, the right to freedom and choice in democracy is not peace, but a partial ceasefire? He might also remind the President that the last great test we faced united the United Kingdom and America, with Lady Thatcher and Ronald Reagan taking decisions that moved Europe in the right direction. Can he appeal to the President that, instead of running around making adverse comments, he should link hands with the United Kingdom to persuade the rest of Europe to step up, as we are now stepping up?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his support. The point he makes about a lasting peace and what it must be is really important. This is not just about stopping the fighting; it is about an enduring and lasting peace for Europe and, of course, the sovereignty of Ukraine—the sovereign ability to choose the alliances that Ukrainian people want, to choose their own Government and to choose how they defend themselves in conjunction with others. It is about the sovereignty of Ukraine, but it is also about the values and freedoms across Europe, including our values and freedoms. That is why this is such an important moment to ensure that NATO is as strong as it has been in the last 75 years as we go forward, and that the bond between us and the US is as strong as it has ever been. That has to be part of the case—the argument—and the way in which we have stepped up today and will continue to do so.

Derek Twigg (Widnes and Halewood) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Prime Minister's statement, and particularly his commitment to accelerate the increase in defence spending, although I fear that we may have to visit the 3% target before the next Parliament. It is very important that we have a whole-society approach to defence. Will he be bringing forward a strategy to make that happen, particularly around the great need to improve our reservist forces?

The Prime Minister: It does have to be a whole-society response, which is why I set that out in my statement in the House, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising it. Of course it has to be a driver of industrial growth and our industrial strategy.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Aside from a few of Putin's poodles, who are not in their seats in the Chamber today, we are of course united in our support for the people of Ukraine, and in wishing the Prime Minister well in his discussions with the President of the United States later this week. But I am afraid that is where the unity ends, because while we support increasing defence spending, we cannot support the populist playbook of cutting foreign aid. Indeed, that position was shared and agreed with by the Foreign Secretary just a matter of days ago, when he said that it would be a "big strategic mistake" that would allow China to step in. Why was the Foreign Secretary wrong, and the Prime Minister right?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his support on the question of Ukraine, which is important. I reassure him that the decision that I have taken today on development aid is not an ideological one. I absolutely understand its importance—it is a difficult and painful decision, but a necessary one. He talks about choice. SNP Members welcomed the biggest settlement since devolution in the Budget, but they voted against it because they could not take a choice. The right hon. Gentleman welcomes the increase in defence spending, but he does not want to say how he will fund it. Grown-up choices about the future of Europe require grown-up decisions and choices, and that is what we have done.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney) (Lab): Instability in Europe washes up on our shores, and I accept the hard decision that the Prime Minister has made to invest in defence, which means difficult decisions on international development. Can we please invest more in cyber, given the disinformation and cyber-attacks that our country faces on a daily basis?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that because cyber is one of the tools for warfare these days. That is why we increased funding in the Budget, and why I have adjusted the 2.5% to 2.6% in the case presented to the House today.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I agree entirely with the strategic direction that the Prime Minister has set out. Defence and security must come first, but he does have choices about how he funds that important uplift. In the last Parliament, he and I voted together against balancing the books on the backs of the poorest people in the world. Does he still think that vote was right?

The Prime Minister: I am proud of that vote at the time, and proud of the work that our country has done on development. This is not a decision that I want to make, and I absolutely want us to get back to more funding on overseas development and increasing those capabilities. Some of that will be helped if, as we are doing, we get the asylum backlog down and stop using that money to pay for hotels, which is not what it is intended for. This has been a difficult decision. The right hon. Gentleman knows how much I value overseas development and how important it is, but I thought, and think, that the most important thing today is to be clear about the commitment we are making on defence, to spell out the reasons that we are making those decisions, and to set out penny and pound exactly how it will be funded. I would not come to the House with a plan that was not credible and not costed, because that would be far worse for our country, but I accept the tenor of what he says about the importance of the issue.

Alex Baker (Aldershot) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement and for the leadership that he has shown in these uncertain times. As the Member of Parliament for the home of the British Army, I know that this is hugely welcome news for my constituency and that my community is ready to serve. What will the Prime Minister do to help to create jobs in the defence sector in my community?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. Given the make-up of her constituency and constituents, they are hardwired for this. This is an important obligation that we must rise to, but it is also an opportunity to ensure that the jobs that will be generated are British jobs, with British skills, in all our constituencies. We will endeavour to ensure that that is the case.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): We are pleased to hear the announcement that the Government will increase defence spending to 2.5%, but we are still waiting for the strategic defence review to be completed, as without that we are in the dark. Will the SDR be announced soon, and if not, will the Prime Minister outline how the additional money will be spent?

The Prime Minister: The SDR is advanced and I will come to the House with it as soon as we can. I want to make sure that we have properly identified the challenges and capabilities. Obviously, we have put the funding forward today. We will do that as soon as we can, and when we do, it will be a credible plan for the House.

Dr Zubir Ahmed (Glasgow South West) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his tireless efforts to bring security to Ukraine, because its security is our security. Does he agree that that is possible only because we are one United Kingdom, and that that strength, that solidarity, is possible only because our four nations work together? Does he agree that those who attempt to fragment that Union in these perilous times do us great harm?

The Prime Minister: I do agree with that. As the United Kingdom we have always stood up in moments such as this, and we stand up again as the United Kingdom and are proud to do so. This is an important moment and a juncture after three years of a conflict,

and the whole House will be aware of the potential consequences of decisions in coming weeks. It is a time for us to pull together.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): President Trump says that he wants his legacy to be that of a peacemaker. In his difficult conversations with the President in a few days' time, will the Prime Minister remind him that the reason the enforced division of Czechoslovakia before the war was a step on the road to disaster, but the division of Germany at the end of the war did not lead to world war three, was that the western half of Europe at the end of world war two was not demilitarised? If there is to be a stable Ukraine after any such enforced division, there must be military protection for the unoccupied half of Ukraine.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is right to talk about peace. It is what everybody wants, not least the Ukrainians, but it must be a lasting peace and not a temporary ceasefire. I agree that that means it needs security guarantees. The configuration of that needs to be agreed, but the security guarantees must be sufficient to deter any further aggression. Otherwise it will be a ceasefire, and that would be the worst of outcomes for the whole of Europe.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his leadership and the announcement today, committing us to 2.6% of GDP on defence spending, and 3% beyond that. That is in stark contrast to the 14 years of erosion of defence spending, the hollowing out of our services, and the service life that resulted. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that the reforms put forward by the Defence Secretary are essential to delivering deterrence and to preventing further acts of Russian brutal imperialist aggression in Europe?

The Prime Minister: The reforms are really important. The strategic review is very important, and the funding is very important. This is a moment when we must step up and play our full part in the defence of our country and the defence of Europe. I have already commented on the plan that the Conservative party put forward at the election. I have not quoted my words; I have quoted the words of the Institute for Government, which said—*[Interruption.]* Well, I would say what I think, but what the Institute for Government said was perfectly right. The plan was not properly funded and it was not a credible plan. We have put a credible plan before the House, and I am glad it has been welcomed.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Plaid Cymru stands firm with the need to safeguard Ukraine's sovereignty, because international security is also national security. However, the UK will now cut the already diminished foreign aid budget to fund military spending. National security calls for building peace, as well as for armed forces. Given the importance that overseas aid plays in preventing conflict, building democracy and curbing warmongering tyrants, to paraphrase the Foreign Secretary, surely cutting foreign aid too is a massive strategic and moral mistake?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady is right to raise the importance of overseas development—I have said that from the Dispatch Box a number of times—but

this is a moment when we have to step up and increase our defence spending. Of course, everybody in this House would wish that was not the situation. We have had a peace dividend for many years, but that has come to an end. We have to step up and our first duty is to keep the country safe, which requires a credible plan. I accept that it is a difficult plan—this is not a decision that I wanted to make—but it is a credible plan for the defence and security of our country and of Europe.

Mr Richard Quigley (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement. I agree with him that it is the beginning, not the end, of the process, but does he agree that it is not just how much money we spend, but how well we spend it? Will he join me in thanking all our armed forces personnel for the commitment they show day in, day out to defending our nation?

The Prime Minister: I agree with both those propositions, and about what we spend and how we spend it. Speaking for myself, the Government and, I am sure, the whole House, we thank our armed services for what they do on our behalf, day in, day out.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): It is without doubt that enduring peace is achieved only if we have enduring security arrangements, so I warmly welcome the Prime Minister's announcement on defence expenditure and the commitment to it. However, I reiterate my observation, and the observation of others, on the way that that money is spent. For a generation, we have been complacent. There is significant dysfunctionality in the way that industry works with Government on the procurement and delivery of defence capabilities in this country. I urge him to keep his Defence Secretary in place for the duration of this Parliament, so that we can find some common purpose, across this House, and deliver enduring reforms that stand the test of time. Treasury after Treasury has found it impossible to get to grips with defence expenditure—we must achieve that in this Parliament.

The Prime Minister: The Defence Secretary has just asked me whether he could reply to that question. The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Procurement and the grip on defence spend has not been in the right place, and we have not used our businesses in the way that we could have done in the past. I gently say that the past 14 years might have been a good period to have got to grips with that, but we need to get to grips with it now. I think that will be welcomed by the whole House, because we need to do that.

Louise Jones (North East Derbyshire) (Lab): I and many of my colleagues started our careers in the shadow of Putin's first invasion of Ukraine, back in 2014. We knew then what Putin was capable of and what Putin intended to do. However, our service was marked by swingeing cuts from the Conservative Government that left our armed forces lacking key capabilities. There is an old saying that if you want peace, prepare for war, so will the Prime Minister assure me that the extra cash will be well spent to cover those capabilities and to take advantage of the new technologies we desperately need?

The Prime Minister: May I thank my hon. Friend for her question and for her service? She is absolutely right that this money must be well spent on the capability that we need, and it will be.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement and I wish him well as he goes to America to persuade the Americans to side with democracy, rather than vote with dictators. There will be a long lead-in time before we see the effects of today's announcement. Given that and the overstretched commitments of our armed forces, how will he give assurances to the Ukrainians that Britain will be able to supply arms and personnel to defend any peace agreement that is reached?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his support. On the question of security guarantees, intense discussions are going on about how that would look and what that might involve. I am absolutely confident that we can play our full part. I will not disclose details to the House for reasons that he will understand, but I am confident that we can and will play our full part in whatever security guarantees may be needed. They will, of course, be with US backing, which is important if they are to be proper guarantees.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the uplift in defence spending but, as the Prime Minister has recognised, there has been a difficult decision about our aid budget. Like many hon. Members, I have seen at first hand the impact of the aid budget, not only on tackling poverty but on our own stability and prosperity. I welcome what the Prime Minister has said so far, but will he reassure us that our commitment remains to get back to 0.7% of GDP for overseas aid, as soon as fiscal circumstances allow?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I want to see that. Notwithstanding the difficult decision we have taken today, I reassure the House that it is important that vital issues, such as those in Gaza, Sudan and Ukraine, are prioritised for reasons that are obvious to Members across the House.

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): Members across the House recognise the need to invest more and to invest differently in defence and security, but it is unbelievably counterproductive and short-sighted to fund that by slashing aid to the poorest and most fragile countries, or by squeezing already stretched departmental budgets. Why will the Prime Minister not fund this by increasing taxes on the most wealthy, rather than placing the burden on the poorest?

The Prime Minister: I do not think the plans put forward by the hon. Lady, as far as I have seen them, are realistic. To make a commitment such as the one we have made, we have to put forward a credible, costed plan in which we can say with certainty precisely where the money is coming from. That is why we have taken the difficult decision that we have taken today.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The Prime Minister's statement hits the nail on the head, unlike the rantings of J. D. Vance on European freedom of speech at the Munich security conference. I know the

[*Dr Rupa Huq*]

statement will be particularly welcome at the Ealing ex-servicemen's club, so will the Prime Minister recommit to our veterans, to the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and to organisations like the Army cadet centre in Acton and the Territorial Army reservists in Wood Lane, either of which would welcome a visit, for those who have served our nation and those who will do so in the future?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I am happy to make that commitment. I ask my hon. Friend to carry that message to her constituents, along with my thanks and those of the Government and the House.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): When the Prime Minister flies off to Washington, he will go with the confidence that this House and the whole country are behind him and wish him well in that very difficult meeting. We know that this country and our continent face possibly the most dangerous moments that we have experienced since the height of the cold war. I welcome his statement on increasing defence spending, which some of us would say is a couple of decades overdue. Will he accept that the benchmark for the success of the defence review is not some arbitrary percentage of what we are spending, but whether we are spending whatever is necessary to give back to our armed forces the warfighting capability that is the only real deterrence that the Russians will respect? I very much doubt that 2.5% or 3% will be enough; I do not say that as a criticism, but because, as a nation, we must be prepared for that.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his sentiments. At a moment like this, it is important that I am able to carry the House with me as we undertake the next stage of these discussions about the security and defence of Europe. It is a very important generational moment, and this House and this country have always come together and stood up at moments like this. I know he has long been a supporter of increased defence spending and capability, and of the notion that there must be a warfighting capability. He is right about that, which is why we have made the decision we have today.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement and his strong leadership. Does he agree that as we rightly reassert the concept of taking responsibility—of responsibility being taken by our own military, people and economy, and by our friends on the continent of Europe—we must also reassert the responsibility of all countries to defend the international rules-based system, which has at its core the concept that bullies must not get away with invading their neighbours? If they do, not only will we dishonour the bravery and sacrifice of our Ukrainian friends, but our collective security will be weakened.

The Prime Minister: Two of those rules-based systems are fundamental: the UN charter and the NATO framework and all the articles in it. Those are hugely important rules-based frameworks that we must absolutely adhere to. I wrote many times about the UN Security Council as a lawyer. In my first appearance at the Security

Council, I was sitting at the table with a country that was in clear violation of the charter, and I did not feel at all comfortable.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): I have distinct memories of, three years ago, helping my Ukrainian friends and colleagues flee the country as tanks came towards their homes. Since then, people across Harpenden, Berkhamsted and Tring have opened their doors to those from Ukraine, but the hope that they once had has turned to fear of what is happening globally. Can the Prime Minister assure the British people that when he speaks to President Trump, he will push for lasting peace, and highlight the importance of working with our European colleagues?

The Prime Minister: I thank, through the hon. Lady, everybody in this country who has opened their doors to Ukrainian refugees. I am very proud of the fact that we have done that, and that the Ukrainian flag flies in so many places across the country. I can reassure her constituents that this announcement today and the approach that we are taking are to ensure that peace continues, but for peace to continue, we have to put ourselves and Ukraine in the strongest possible position, and this is a step along that road.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): It is shameful that in such a volatile world, for far too long, conversations around defence spending have involved a lot of hot air and not much hard action. Colleagues from across the House will today have to recognise that the Prime Minister has changed that, with a clear, funded and needed plan for investing in our defence. Supply chains are so important to security, so he will recognise, as I do, that what matters is not just what we spend, but where we spend it. How will he make sure that our whole Government are united in the effort to build up our domestic supply chain capacity, when it comes to key defence assets?

The Prime Minister: This is where the industrial strategy and growth are so important, because as we move to greater defence spend, it is vital that we ensure that supply chains are in this country, as far as they can be, and that they lead to British, well-paid and secure jobs. We know that the defence sector already provides many well-paid jobs across the country. I want more.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Can I say to those who were late, please do not embarrass the Chair by standing?

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Almost on that point, Mr Speaker, what an abdication of responsibility and duty it is that not a single member of the Reform party is able to ask a question of the Prime Minister this afternoon on these precious issues of defence and security. They are treated with a very different level of seriousness by Members on the Conservative and Government Benches.

Many have asked the Prime Minister about the use of Russian frozen assets. Anybody who has studied the issue with regard to Libya will know just how complicated international law and convention has made the defrosting of frozen assets so that they can be put to proper use. In his discussions in Washington and with the other European leaders, can the Prime Minister press for urgent,

collaborative and international reform of those rules, so that those frozen assets can be used to help the Ukrainians and their military to defeat Russian aggression?

The Prime Minister: The point that the hon. Gentleman raises is important. The process is very complicated, for reasons that he will understand. Obviously we have been able to use some of the interest on those frozen assets, which has proved valuable to Ukraine, but we need to work with our European colleagues and to collaborate on other legitimate, proper ways to raise further funding, and we will continue to do that with our allies.

Matthew Patrick (Wirral West) (Lab): I welcome the statement from the Prime Minister. This is a major commitment to our defence; I think it will be heard across the world and welcomed by our allies, particularly those facing Russian or Iranian aggression. How will the Prime Minister ensure that British businesses, which are so crucial to our defence, are supported in their important task?

The Prime Minister: That has to be done through the industrial strategy and the growth strategy that we will put in place, but it is vital that this is seen as not just a duty and responsibility, which it is, but as an opportunity for British businesses, and for well-paid, secure jobs, which are so vital to so many communities.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): The Prime Minister knows that he can rely on the support of the SNP when it comes to efforts to restore Ukrainian sovereignty in the face of Russian aggression, despite the baseless rhetoric from those on the Benches behind him. I would like him to acknowledge that.

I welcome the Prime Minister raising defence expenditure to 2.5%, albeit by 2027, which will be three years after the election, despite the pledge being in the Labour party's manifesto. However, it cannot be right to balance the books at a cost to the poorest in global society, when there is a Government Budget of £1.1 trillion. When he goes to Washington on Thursday and gets his pat on the back from the President of the United States, will he spare a thought for those—predominantly women and children—who will suffer immeasurably, and some of whom will die, as a result of his decision today?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support on Ukraine. The First Minister has set out that support in clear terms in recent days; that is important, and I acknowledge it. We have had to make difficult decisions, but as he and the House know, wherever there is war and conflict, it is the poor and the poorest who are hit hardest. There is no easy way through this, but we have to ensure that we win peace through strength, because anything other than peace will hit the very people the hon. Gentleman has identified harder than anybody else on the planet. That is why it is so important that we have taken the decision we have today.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): National security is the first duty of any Government, so I welcome the Prime Minister's announcement, and his strong leadership today. This Government are rising to the challenge of investing in our defence, whereas the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) has said that Vladimir Putin is the leader he admires the most, and

that NATO provoked Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Does the Prime Minister share my concern that those comments play right into the hands of Britain's enemies?

The Prime Minister: You do not show patriotism by fawning over Putin.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): No decent Government cut international development budgets lightly. The Prime Minister's discomfort is plain for all to see and will be shared across the House, but will he look at other things that perhaps present easier choices—in particular, his choice to spend billions of pounds on Mauritius? Will he repurpose that money in defence of our armed forces?

The Prime Minister: Obviously in the short term, we have to make decisions between the here and now and the commitment to 2.5% in 2027. Having looked at the available options, this was the choice that had to be made, and that I think would have been made by any serious Prime Minister making the commitment that I have made today. Of course, we need to look at other things as we go forward from here. Many people across the House have mentioned, and I have set out, the ambition of getting to 3%, but I will put forward only credible costed plans to this House, not fantasy figures. *[Interruption.]* The Opposition chunter away, but this is a moment for a serious, costed plan. It is not the time for ridiculous, uncosted plans.

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement. I think the entire House agrees that our safety and that of our allies depends on showing Putin that we have the resolve and resources to defeat him. We are far more prosperous than he is: European NATO's GDP is \$24.5 trillion, and Russia's is only \$2 trillion. Clearly, the matter before us is converting those resources into fighting forces and matériel in the years ahead. Can the Prime Minister assure me that the strategic defence review and our defence industrial strategy will ensure that we have long-term orders that give us the capacity that we need, as well as secure supply chains, inputs such as steel and, of course, the ability to scale rapidly if we need to rearm?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising those points. They are all important, and of course, they have to be hardwired into the work we do as we go forward.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): The Prime Minister will have the support of both sides of this House when he goes to see President Trump on Thursday. If he fails to encourage the US to become the backstop for Ukraine, though, no matter how much he increases spending in the next couple of years, there will be difficulty. What conversations is the Prime Minister having about a backstop for Europe to make sure that Ukraine gets that support?

The Prime Minister: I am not going to pre-empt the discussions I will have, but the hon. Gentleman makes an important point. I absolutely believe that we should play our full part in any security guarantees—if that is what happens; we do not even know whether we will get to that stage—but I also absolutely think there needs to be US backing for that, because I do not think a security guarantee will be operative without that backing.

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement, because although difficult decisions have had to be taken today, the alternative is inaction—which, of course, is also a decision. Does the Prime Minister agree that the lesson of history is that Ukraine's survival and its defence are completely indivisible from our own?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I do. That is why I say that this is not just about the sovereignty of Ukraine, but about European defence and security and our own defence and security. We have already paid a heavy price in this country—the contribution we have made has had an effect on our cost of living, our energy prices and so much else—but this is fundamental. It is about our values; it is about our freedom; and it is about understanding who Putin is, and what his ambitions are. We must never forget that.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): With some of our European allies likening our predicament in 2025 to that of 1938, the increase in defence spending announced today by the Prime Minister is welcome, but I am concerned that it will come too late. Will the Prime Minister look at Liberal Democrat proposals to increase the digital services tax, which would raise £3 billion this year?

The Prime Minister: I do not accept the argument that this has come too late. It has come at the point at which we are able to put a credible, costed plan before the House. We have known for three years that this moment was going to come, and the last few weeks have accelerated this and made it more urgent, which is why I have made the statement I have today.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's leadership today. He is undertaking the first duty of any leader, which is the defence of the nation, and reiterating the fundamental British value that our country opposes fascists, and never appeases them. He rightly talked about renewing the social contract with the British people when it comes to jobs, skills and industry. Does he agree that if we are to do that, it must reach every part of our country, including areas that I represent that are far too often left behind?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I do. We must rise to that challenge. Many of the well-paid, skilled jobs in the defence sector are found across the whole United Kingdom. We need to ensure that there are more of those well-paid, skilled jobs across the whole United Kingdom.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement, and for acknowledging that although what has been said today is very important, he and the Government will need to come back to us on getting towards 3%. In response to an earlier question, the Prime Minister said that the peace dividend is gone. Does he agree that we also need to look at welfare spending, given that in the current circumstances, no serious country can spend more on welfare than on defence?

The Prime Minister: I do agree with that. The last Government let welfare spending spiral by an additional £30 billion. Some 2.8 million people are out of work

because they cannot go to work due to some health-related issue. That is a very high number. It is out of control, and we have to get it back under control.

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for his statement, with which I agree. Does he agree that Clement Attlee and Ernest Bevin showed that the defence of the United Kingdom and Europe against totalitarianism is at the core of this House's values and those of our party? Does he also agree that what we can learn from their great political lives is that we will face very many difficult public spending decisions over the next decade, and that our moral duty as a Government is to take those decisions, however difficult or heartbreaking they may be?

The Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend. These are difficult decisions with very real consequences, which I acknowledge. As an earlier contributor said, though, the alternative to action is inaction, and in the light of the last three years and particularly the last few weeks, inaction would be completely the wrong thing for our country and our continent.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): I absolutely agree with the Prime Minister that this is an important moment for our nation, and I welcome the rebalancing of expenditure towards defence. However, does he agree that the success of our national security posture will be judged not by percentages but by the strength of the deterrent that we build, and is it his abiding commitment to be unwavering in building such a deterrent?

The Prime Minister: Yes, it is, because I agree with the hon. and learned Gentleman that it is the strength of our deterrent that counts in a moment like this. I am very proud of our armed forces—those who have provided so much for so long—but now is a time to ask more of them and to step up.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): The Prime Minister spoke about the threat that Russia poses in our waters. Just a few weeks ago, I saw a piece of undersea cable that had been cut, almost certainly by a Russian vessel. What more can the Government do to protect Britain's undersea infrastructure from foreign attack?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue. It is a bit like cyber: the way in which conflict, war and aggression are demonstrated these days is changing, and we must protect our vital assets, including the cables under the sea. I have had extensive conversations with European allies and NATO about how we can better protect that infrastructure.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I have been to war three times, each time working for an American general—General Schwarzkopf in the first Gulf war, the outstanding David Petraeus in the second Gulf war, and General Richard Mills of the US Marine Corps in Afghanistan. One of the lessons that keeps coming up after those wars is that we have to prepare for the fight that we do not want to have. I absolutely welcome the Prime Minister's statement today. As well as sending the Chancellor into the new defence reform and efficiency team, I encourage him to take a personal interest in the way that this money is spent, in order to prepare us for the fight that we do not want to have.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his service to his country, and he is absolutely right that we have to prepare for the fight that we do not want to have. I can assure him that as Prime Minister, I have a very keen personal interest, duty and responsibility in all these matters.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): I welcome the statement from my right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister. In places such as Telford—which has a proud defence sector—companies, communities and supply chains need certainty. British taxpayers will be demanding that their money is used to enable British-based companies to support our British troops around the world. Can my right hon. and learned Friend assure me that each and every pound will be diverted to British industry or British-based industries, enabling them to support our interests around the world?

The Prime Minister: I certainly want that to be the case wherever we can. That is why we will have the plan for reform and efficiency, but that needs to be translated into British skills and secure British jobs in every constituency across the land.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): It is disappointing that the Prime Minister's statement did not include any reference to the United Nations, or a pathway to end the dreadful conflicts in Ukraine, Gaza, Sudan or the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Clearly, his statement will have a massive effect on the poorest people in the poorest countries in the world through a cut in overseas aid budgets, but what effect will it have on the poorest people in this country—for example, those disadvantaged by the two-child benefit cap or by the housing crisis that so many face? The Prime Minister says that tough decisions are coming up; what is going to be the effect of the increase in defence spending on the poorest people in this country?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman says I did not mention the UN. The UN charter is at the heart of this, because Russia is in breach of it. Russia is an aggressor that has invaded another country and is occupying part of that country, and it will go further if it is encouraged down that line. That is why we need to take these decisions. It is the first duty of Government to keep our country safe and secure. That is a duty I take extremely seriously. The poorest people in this country would be the first to suffer if the security and safety of our country was put in peril.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): The Prime Minister is absolutely right to say that NATO is the bedrock on which we found our alliance. He is absolutely right to say that we can only achieve peace through strength, and he is absolutely right to cut the foreign development budget to pay for a £13.4 billion increase in defence spending. It is a difficult decision, but there is nothing more important than the defence and security of the British people. What conversations has the Prime Minister had or does he hope to have with our European allies about their defence spending? Does he hope to see increases across the continent in the future?

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend may know, I have had extensive discussions with all our European allies. Those have been particularly intense over the past three or four weeks, and I will continue to have those discussions, because it is right to say that Europe and the United Kingdom need to step up. We need to do that alongside our allies. That means capability, co-ordination and spending. The best way, in my view, to do that is in a collegiate, collaborative way, working with our allies. That is what I have been doing.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): In a world where our adversaries are intent on blunting our national security and prosperity, I welcome the Prime Minister's statement and thank him for his commitment to increase defence spending. Can he update the House on what actions the Government are taking to discourage BRICS nations and other emergent high-growth economies from advertently or inadvertently doing anything that would assist Russia in its pursuit of its invasion in Ukraine?

The Prime Minister: This is a really important issue, and it is important that, as well as sanctions, we bear down on those providing assistance to Russia, whether that is countries or individual businesses. We shall continue to do so, working with allies.

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): My right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister is absolutely right to say that this is a generational moment for this country's security. I pay tribute to this generation's armed forces and all those who work in the defence sector, including in Stevenage, where they are refitting the Storm Shadows for use by Ukraine for its security and our security. Does my right hon. and learned Friend agree that the increase in defence spending he has announced today will, done properly, also help the wider economy?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend's constituents working in Stevenage for their important work. It is important that we make sure that this spending is measured in jobs and secure jobs across the country.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): Last night, I attended a concert in Bath abbey called "Together We Stand". The Ukrainian deputy ambassador was there, and he particularly praised the direct link that my Bath council had formed with the city of Oleksandriya. It has formed such strong people-to-people contact, and it is enduring and provides direct support. What more can the Government do to encourage other councils to form these direct links to Ukrainian communities?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased to hear about that direct link. I think that people-to-people contact is important, both in relation to our appreciation and understanding of what is going on in Ukraine and in relation to the resilience of Ukrainians. I support any such initiatives.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Prime Minister's statement. In particular, I know that the Ukrainian forces on the frontlines will be reassured today. Clearly, the aid spending decision will not have been taken lightly, but following reductions at the US Agency for International Development, it

[Joe Powell]

does mean tens of billions out of the global aid system, which could be exploited by Russia and China. Will the Prime Minister consider a deadline for ending the accounting of asylum costs to the aid budget, which is currently 28%, or £4.2 billion of money that should be used on aid spending overseas?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter. It is a really difficult decision, and it is important that we make clear that we remain committed to the work we are doing in Gaza, Ukraine and Sudan. It is important, as he rightly says, that we get the asylum numbers down and the processing done so that we can end the ridiculous use of money—money that should be for overseas aid—on hotel bills in this country. That spiralled under the last Government.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): As a veteran, I welcome the move to 2.5%. It is a milestone on the right track to increasing defence spending to 3.0% and probably beyond, particularly given that defence chiefs are reported to have requested 2.65%.

With increasing defence spending and suggestions that British forces may be involved in a peacekeeping mission, along with ongoing support to Ukraine, it is reassuring to see that we are not prepared to acquiesce to Russian belligerence. With that in mind, as the Prime Minister prepares to meet President Trump, will he clarify with the President why the US sided with Russia and North Korea yesterday, voting against the European resolution that Russia should withdraw from Ukraine at the UN General Assembly?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his service. Our position on the UN resolution was clear from the way we voted yesterday. I think that sends a very powerful signal of where we stand, and that is with Ukraine.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement today, his commitment to 2.5% defence spending and his continued engagement with our international partners. As we are a proud maritime nation that is facing threats from Russian interference with undersea cables and from incursion into our waters by the shadow fleet, does he agree that now is the time to bolster our Royal Navy?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I think it is important that we bolster across our forces. There are threats on land, threats in the air, threats at sea and, indeed, threats under the sea. It is important that we can meet all those threats.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I welcome this important statement from the Prime Minister. The Liberal Democrats support an increase in defence budgets and the leadership in Europe that the Prime Minister has described. The Prime Minister spoke about the need for unity and a whole-society approach. He will have heard the concerns from across the House about the way he is proposing to fund this increase in the defence budget, and the deep concern that it will create opportunities for our adversaries, Russia and China, around the world. Will he undertake to meet other parties to build the consensus behind the funding of

2.5% and then 3%, so that we can maintain the unity and the national purpose that he has so eloquently described?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for his support and that of his party. That is important at a moment like this. So far as the funding of the 2.5% is concerned, that has been set out today. The commitment on the ambition to get to 3% is something that we need to talk about across this House. I will work with all parties on any issue of the security and defence of our country.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): The Prime Minister has delivered a powerful statement today, and I know that his unwavering commitment to the defence of the realm will be greatly appreciated by my constituents in Stockton North. He mentioned the industrial strategy. Does he agree that we need to start immediately to mobilise our steel, chemicals and shipbuilding industries, working with regional groups such as the Teesside defence and innovation cluster to ensure that we build the capability that we need for our defence supply chains at home?

The Prime Minister: The industrial strategy and steel within it are vitally important, as my hon. Friend and the House will know. Steel and our ability to manufacture it are vital to our security, and we must do everything to ensure that is preserved into the future.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Scotland wants to play its full part in this great national endeavour at this moment of peril, yet, almost incredibly, tomorrow the Scottish Parliament will discuss stripping defence companies of state funding. It is remarkable. The measure may not pass, of course, and I certainly hope it does not. Will the defence industrial strategy take into account what is happening in Scotland, where certain elements seem to be siding with other national interests, so that we can protect our defence industry and this great country?

The Prime Minister: Across the country, it is important that we stand by our defence sector and enhance our defence sector. We should thank those who work in it for what they are doing. Today's announcement will mean that there is more yet to do.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): I welcome the Prime Minister's statement, this Government's unwavering support for Ukraine and this very necessary decision to increase defence spending. As someone whose close family has served in our armed forces, I know that over the years as a country, we have not always provided our servicemen and women with the equipment and support that they deserve. Can the Prime Minister reassure the House that this funding will be used to ensure that our servicemen and women are provided with that equipment and that support and with respect, given that they are willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for our country?

The Prime Minister: Yes, that is hugely important, and we will ensure that we do so. I had a family member who served and whose ship went down, and I will never forget the agony that my mother went through until she knew for sure that he was safe. That is what is on the line each and every day for our armed services.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I thank the Prime Minister for his very strong statement. He has talked of a national security position, a whole-society response and a time for us all to pull together. May I ask him to ensure that Northern Ireland businesses are part of that national response? May I also ask the Government to recognise and support the strategic and long-term importance of the Aldergrove military base and RAF station in Northern Ireland, which is able to contribute to not only our national but our international defence? Will the Prime Minister ask the Secretary of State for Defence to meet me to discuss those two issues?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the question of Northern Ireland. It is important for this to be a whole-United Kingdom effort and contribution, and for us to ensure that those opportunities are there across the whole United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland. I will of course ask the Defence Secretary for that meeting, and I am sure he will agree to it.

David Taylor (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): I spent all last week in Ukraine, and had the opportunity to meet a Defence Minister and a number of soldiers on the frontline. The Defence Minister painted a bleak picture of the situation there, including the fact that Russian production of arms continues to go up and up and up. Meanwhile, the soldiers I spoke to on the frontline are facing unimaginable challenges, and need much more resources to win this fight. I strongly welcome the announcement that defence spending will reach 2.5%, that support for Ukraine will be increased and that defence spending will reach 3% in the future, because I am convinced that we face an existential crisis in the world.

However, as one who founded the Labour Campaign for International Development, I am pained by today's other news, and I hope we can get back on track for 0.7% as soon as possible. In that spirit, may I draw the Prime Minister's attention to the last Labour Government's record of thinking of innovative and different ways of securing development finance, and may I ask him to meet me, and other Labour Members with development experience, to consider alternative ways of financing support for development, such as special drawing rights from the International Monetary Fund and more debt relief?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his commitment to international development. He is absolutely right about that, and we will of course work across the House on alternative and innovative ways in which to support development around the world.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): I welcome the Prime Minister's announcements wholeheartedly, and encourage him to get to 3% as soon as possible. However, we do not just need a monetary value; we need to know how and where the money will be spent, and that will be done through the strategic defence review, which gives assurance to our allies, deterrence to our enemies and, most important, confidence in our troops. Will the Prime Minister confirm that the SDR will be published in the spring—in a couple of weeks' time—or will it be delayed until June, as the statement seemed to suggest?

The Prime Minister: I did not mean to imply that in the statement; I was referring to the security strategy. The SDR is well under way, and as soon it has been completed I will put it before the House, but what is most important is for us to get it right rather than meeting a timeline. I am not seeking to delay it, but I am absolutely clear in my own mind that we need to ensure that we understand the challenges we face, and the capability.

I am particularly struck by the developments that have taken place during the three years of the conflict in Ukraine. The way in which the fighting started three years ago is very different from the way in which it is happening now. I was there a few weeks ago, and among the things I took away was the need for us to learn the lessons of Ukraine and bind them into what we are doing, rather than thinking that we are dealing with the world of even two or three years ago. That is why I want to ensure that this is the right review and the right strategy to put before the House.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): Let me start by drawing attention to my declarations in the Register of Members' Financial Interests in respect of the GMB defence manufacturing trade union. I welcome the Prime Minister's commitment to rebuilding the UK's industrial capacity in defence.

All Governments face a balance between international collaboration and avoiding dependency on complex supply chains which can limit freedom of action, as some of our allies have found in their attempts to aid Ukraine. Does the Prime Minister agree that one of the objectives of the spending announced today must be to maintain and strengthen our sovereign freedom to aid our allies and defend our own shores?

The Prime Minister: I do agree with that, and I agree with my hon. Friend's comments about the supply chains, which are vital to the security effort.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): The former United States Defence Secretary Jim Mattis once said:

"If you don't fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition ultimately."

Can the Prime Minister not see that funding this uplift through official development assistance is short-sighted and a strategic and moral mistake, because prevention is cheaper than wars, because this gives more leverage to Russia and China, and because we do it on the backs of the world's poorest? In fact, it is something that I never thought I would see a Labour Government do, and a pitiful inheritance from 1997. Given that it is a policy choice and not a retrospective fiscal one, and given that it is in direct contravention of the law passed here in 2015, which rules out the link between levels of defence and development funding, will this Labour Government be repealing that law?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is right to say that prevention is better than war—that is why it is important that we prepare our defence to be able to secure and maintain the peace, and that is precisely why I made my statement today—but she is wrong about the law, and we are not going to repeal it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a surprise not to be called last, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I welcome the Prime Minister's statement. It has encouraged everyone in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and we thank him for that. As for an increase in defence spending from 2.5% to 3%, let me gently remind the House that during the cold war it was 7%—so we have a bit to go yet to catch up, but there we are.

The new defence and security agreement with Norway is to be welcomed, but I am a great believer in ensuring, while we build new rooms in a house for new family members, that existing family members are comfortable at home with us. What discussions has the Prime Minister had with our closest ally, the United States of America, about aligning our defence strategies and solidifying the network of information-sharing?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support. We already work closely with Norway on defence and security, and we want to enhance and strengthen that, which the bilateral relationship will do. Of course we need to work with the United States, and I will be leaving for the US tomorrow. I have already had a number of conversations with President Trump, and our teams are speaking continually about these very important matters.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the ever-patient Charlotte Cane to ask the final question.

Charlotte Cane (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): I welcome much of what was in the Prime Minister's statement, particularly what he said about our continued support for the brave people of Ukraine, but I was shocked by what he has described as a difficult and painful decision to cut overseas aid. I suggest that it was nowhere near as difficult and painful as it will be for the very poorest families who find that our aid is no longer there for them. It is also hugely short-sighted, because helping communities to be stable and secure reduces the risk of war and unrest. Will the Prime Minister please assure us that he will look for less damaging ways of funding this much-needed increase in defence expenditure?

The Prime Minister: It is a difficult decision—there is no getting away from that—but we cannot have a situation in which Members of this House stand up and support 2.5%, heading to 3%, and then cannot agree, or will not take the difficult decisions that are necessary in order to get there. I am not pretending that this is an easy decision, and I am certainly not pretending that it is a decision I wanted to make as Prime Minister. It is a decision that I am driven to make for the security and safety of our country and our continent.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the Prime Minister. We got in all the Members who were bobbing throughout.

Warm Home Discount

2.9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Miatta Fahnbulleh): With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the action we are taking to protect families in the face of the global spike in gas prices. In recent months, wholesale gas prices have risen to their highest level in two years. They are up nearly 15% compared with the previous price cap period. As a result, this morning Ofgem announced the energy price cap will rise by around £9 a month between April and June. We know this will be unwelcome news for families across the country that are already worried about their bills, but as Ofgem's chief executive officer, Jonathan Brearley, said today,

"our reliance on international gas markets leads to volatile wholesale prices, and continues to drive up bills".

This week marks three years since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and once again the British people are paying the price of our country being exposed to fossil fuel markets controlled by petrostates and dictators. The truth is that every day we remain stuck on gas is another day families, businesses and, indeed, the public finances are at risk from these kinds of price spikes. That is why sprinting to home-grown, clean energy is the only way to end our exposure and our vulnerability as a country. In the meantime, we are determined to do all that we can to protect people, and today I want to set out the measures we are taking.

First, we want to provide greater help to the most vulnerable in time for next winter. The warm home discount currently gives around 3 million families a £150 rebate on their energy bills. The current system provides help to those on means-tested benefits, but excludes millions of people in homes not classified as hard to heat, as a result of criteria introduced by the last Government in 2022. These criteria are seen by many as arbitrary and unreliable, and they mean there are families in almost exactly the same circumstances with some receiving help and others not.

Today, we have announced that we will consult on proposals to abolish this restriction, meaning all households receiving means-tested benefits would be eligible for bills support next winter—from 3 million families in the current system to more than 6 million with our proposals—so that one in five families in Britain would get help with their bills through this scheme, including an additional 900,000 families with children and a total of 1.8 million households in fuel poverty. This Government are determined to do everything in our power to help people struggling to pay their energy bills and support the most vulnerable in our society.

Secondly, because of our exposure to fossil fuels, the cost of living crisis saw bills rocket to £2,500 and families plunged into unstable debt—debt that continues to accumulate today. In the system we have inherited, every bill payer pays for managing this debt burden. We are determined to act on behalf of those in debt and all the bill payers who are paying the costs of it. So we are working closely with Ofgem to accelerate proposals on a debt relief scheme that will support households that have built up unsustainable energy debt through the crisis and have no way of paying it. This will be an important first step to cut the costs of servicing bad

energy debt, and under these plans the target would be to reduce the debt allowance paid by all bill payers to pre-crisis levels.

Thirdly, we know that one of the best answers to high bills is upgrading homes so that they are cheaper to run, so we will shortly announce the details of around £0.5 billion pounds of funding under the warm homes local grant and £1.3 billion under the warm homes social housing fund to invest in home upgrades over the coming years and cut fuel poverty. In all, up to 300,000 households will benefit from upgrades in the next financial year through our warm homes plan—whether it is new insulation, double glazing, a heat pump or rooftop solar panels—which is more than double the number supported in the last financial year. We will also ensure that landlords invest in energy efficiency upgrades that will make homes warmer and bring down costs for tenants, lifting up to 1 million people out of fuel poverty, so that we are doing everything we can to ensure people have the security of a home they can afford to heat.

Fourthly, we are clear that we need a regulator that fights for consumers. That is why we have called on Ofgem to use its powers to the maximum to protect consumers by challenging unlawful back billing, taking action on inaccurate bills, driving the smart meter roll-out, giving every family the option of a zero standing charge tariff so they have more choice in how they pay for their energy, and ensuring that compensation is given for wrongful installation of prepayment meters. We are moving forward on our review of Ofgem to ensure it has the powers it needs to stand up for consumers and clamp down on poor behaviour by energy companies.

This set of measures shows a Government willing to use all the powers at our disposal to help protect consumers. However, important as these measures are, I must stress to the House that there is no proper solution to rising energy bills while this country remains exposed to the rollercoaster of fossil fuel markets. That is why this Government are moving at speed to deliver clean power by lifting the onshore wind ban in England, consenting nearly 3 GW of solar, setting up Great British Energy, delivering a record-breaking renewables auction, making it easier to build the next generation of new nuclear power stations, and getting on with the job of implementing the reforms to the planning system, the grid and renewables auctions set out in our clean power action plan.

I have to report to the House, however, that despite the importance of this mission and the fact that we are running it, we continue to receive representations from Opposition parties not to speed up, but to slow down and to reject solar power, reject onshore wind, reject offshore wind and reject new transmission infrastructure—representations that, if accepted, would leave us more vulnerable and more insecure, with the British people paying the price. Let me tell the House that we will reject those representations. We know that every solar panel we put up, every wind turbine we build and every piece of transmission infrastructure we construct makes us more secure, and every time the Conservatives oppose those measures, they double down on their legacy of leaving this country exposed and the British people deeply vulnerable.

This Government will do whatever it takes to stand up for working people now and in the future—protecting families and businesses from the consequences of global events, driving forward our plans to bring down bills for

good and doing everything in our power to support those most in need. I commend this statement to the House.

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

2.17 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement. Today, the Government have announced an expansion of the warm home discount, with a change to the criteria that will see more low-income households receive a £150 payment to heat their homes, but for many this payment will be immediately eaten up by the increase in the energy price cap. We must be clear that the best protection for vulnerable households is to prioritise cheap energy. The announcement today is, frankly, a sticking-plaster approach to rising energy bills.

This Government fail to grasp the core issue: energy costs in this country are far too high for businesses, industry and, of course, bill payers. When the energy price cap rose in 2022, the now Secretary of State called it a “national emergency”. He called for an urgent freeze on energy bills and cited a lack of leadership. Now that he is in government, the only thing he is able to freeze is vulnerable pensioners by taking away their winter fuel allowance with no notice. Does the Minister think that shows leadership? I know that my constituents, and presumably hers too, will be concerned about their bills rising, concerned about inflation creeping back up—hitting 3% in January, despite the hard work done last year to bring it under control—and angry that Labour’s promise to cut bills by £300 is being broken.

The worst part of all of this is that this Government, led by ideological zealotry from the Secretary of State, are doubling down. Their obsession with going further and faster than any country in the world to meet their own self-imposed 2030 target is going to increase people’s bills even further. The renewables industry has warned that their rush to build record renewables in the next five years will push up prices and “consumers will lose out”. The Government’s rush to build twice as much grid in the next five years as was built in the last decade will increase the network costs on people’s bills. The Office for Budget Responsibility has said that the environmental levies will increase to £14 billion in 2030, largely driven by the hidden cost of renewables, all of which will end up on people’s energy bills.

The Labour party was not honest about its promise during the election to cut bills by £300, it was not honest about its plan to take the winter fuel payment away from millions of pensioners living in poverty, and now it is not being honest with the British people about what its plans will do to our energy bills. If we have learned anything over the past few years, it is that the cost of energy is absolutely critical to any modern economy. We cannot go on following ideology over evidence and putting political targets ahead of what will cut the cost of energy in this country. However, this Government are in denial, which is why they scrapped the full system cost analysis commissioned when the Conservatives were in office.

Will the Minister say when proposals for a debt relief scheme will be published? Will she confirm by how much she expects levies to increase over the next five

[Andrew Bowie]

years? Will she commission a full system cost analysis of what the 2030 target will do to people's energy bills? Will she confirm by how much bills will rise before we see the £300 off, which we were all promised?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: The hon. Gentleman is right that energy prices are too high—on that, we agree. We also agree that that is worrying for families and businesses across the country. However, I would point out that 80% of this rise has been driven by wholesale prices. I would also gently remind him that the reason we are in this position—the reason we are so exposed to global fossil fuel prices over which we have no control—is because the Conservatives spent 14 years in government squandering the opportunity to accelerate the transition to clean power and reduce our dependence on global fossil fuel prices, leaving families across the country exposed.

The status quo is not tenable. We are at a point where energy prices are at an historic high, and we got here under his Government. That is a status quo that we are not willing to contend with. That is the reason—not because of ideology, but because we see the obvious: as long as we are dependent on global fossil fuel prices, we will be on this rollercoaster. That is what is driving the push to clean power. While the Conservatives have no alternatives, we have a clear alternative: we run to clean power; and while we do that, we support the most vulnerable households in the short term.

To answer the shadow Minister's question, Ofgem is in the process of consulting on the debt support scheme as we speak, and we will support it to put that in place. We know that the debt burden has increased by £3.8 billion, and more than 1.8 million households in need of help will be supported by that scheme. We are absolutely committed to cutting bills—everything we are doing as a Government is driven by that desire and clear commitment. We will do that both through short-term measures and, critically, by running at clean power by 2030.

We have a plan to deal with energy bills. The Opposition have a plan to slow down and do nothing, and it will be the British public who pay the price.

Jon Trickett (Normanton and Hemsworth) (Lab): It is clear that the Conservative party left this country dependent on global fossil fuel supplies, which both burn the planet and are damaging in terms of price controls. However, the Tories left something else as well: a rigged energy market, which gave £480 billion to the energy industry yet left 8 million households—probably 17 million people—in fuel poverty, spending more than 10% of their income on energy.

It is therefore welcome that the Minister has today announced an additional £150 for the warm home discount, but that, as I understand it, is a one-off payment for next winter. A £150 one-off payment will not resolve the underlying problem—today, the regulator has increased the cap by £111 or £108, depending on how it is calculated, per year on an ongoing basis. I welcome the Government's announcement and recognise the Minister's commitment to changing the way that things work. However, will my hon. Friend confirm to the House that the Government intend to end this

rigged market, which works in favour of the profiteers, and tackle the scourge of fuel poverty, while at the same time securing a just transition to clean energy?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have an energy market that does not work sufficiently in the interest of consumers, and we are committed to turning that around. That is why we are reforming the electricity market, why we are trying to drive forward a shift from fossil fuels to clean power, and why we are putting in place the review of Ofgem, to ensure that customers and consumers are at the very heart of everything we do in the energy market. This is an important step to supporting households in the short term. We took action this winter, with up to £1 billion of support through Government and industry to help the most vulnerable customers, and the measures announced today will ensure that we will provide support next winter. However, it is not the end of our ambition; it is the start of our ambition to reform the energy market.

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

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement. It is deeply troubling that we remain so reliant on the foreign gas markets and that, as a result, vulnerable people in this country will see an increase in their bills.

I completely welcome the proposals to expand the warm home discount. No one should have to choose between heating and eating—we all know that. However, the reality is that we have to get beyond that issue and reduce consumption, instead of just handing public money to our energy giants. The Lib Dems have been calling for a 10-year emergency home insulation plan for a long time, and it was disappointing that the amendment tabled to the Great British Energy Bill by my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Pippa Heylings) was not taken up, so I would be grateful if that could be looked at again in any other scope.

What timeline can we expect for the upgrade of building standards for new homes and the decent homes standard for existing properties, so that people are not having to consume as much electricity and gas? Until all homes are properly insulated, what progress has been made on requiring all energy companies to sign up to a single social tariff, paying particular attention to the pensioners left cold after the removal of the winter fuel allowance?

I was contacted by Michael from H2-ecO, a company that does lots of retrofitting, who told me about the home upgrade grant, affectionately known as HUG, which is ending in March, when it is due to be replaced immediately, with continuity, by the warm homes local grant. The company was told on Friday that it will not be continued, and that there will be a pause—five weeks before the scheme ends. People have been told that they would be able to pre-register, but now they are told that there will be a pause. They asked me to tell you that they are concerned that they will lose their contractors [Interruption.] Sorry—not you, Madam Deputy Speaker, but the Minister. I apologise.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. You have two minutes for your contribution, and you are just over that. If you could come to a conclusion, that would be great.

Vikki Slade: I absolutely will, Madam Deputy Speaker. They asked me to ask you—sorry, they asked me to ask the Minister what guarantee can be offered that the scheme will open immediately, and not be slowed by reviews, and when will you set out your long-term plans before 2026?

Madam Deputy Speaker: When will you set those out, Minister, since I will not be responding at the Dispatch Box?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: The hon. Lady is right that insulating and upgrading people's homes is the route by which we will reduce bills and deliver homes that are warmer and cheaper to run. That is why we are absolutely committed to the warm homes plan. Rather than there being a pause, we are running at this.

Next financial year, 300,000 homes will be upgraded, which is double the number in the previous financial year, and that is just the start for our warm homes plan. We are working with colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to bring forward the future homes and buildings standards. Critically, we have spoken to industry, installers and local government, and we are acutely aware that there should and cannot be a hiatus. We are moving forward with the local grant and the warm homes social housing scheme to ensure that there is not one. I ask the hon. Lady to write with the specifics of that scheme, because we are trying to design it to stop that.

Critically, on the social tariff, we are clear that clean power is the route by which we will bear down on energy costs in the long term, but that we will need to support the most vulnerable customers as we get there. There are different ways to design a social tariff, and we are looking at options for how to support the most vulnerable at the moment, and the warm home discount is a key part of delivering that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Luke Murphy, a member of the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): Many of my constituents, like others across the country, will be concerned about the increase in their energy bills announced today. I therefore welcome the Government's extension of the warm home discount, as well as the measures to tackle unsustainable debt and push the regulator to do more to support consumers.

I must say that the shadow Minister talks as if his Government left a legacy of low energy prices, when it was his Government who left an appalling legacy of high energy prices. I have stood in both this Chamber and Westminster Hall and heard shadow Ministers attack renewables and electric vehicles—do they not realise that they are attacking the very means of bringing down the cost of energy? Does the Minister agree that our clean energy mission and renewables is the fastest way to ensure we end our dependence on volatile fossil fuels, which also leaves us at the mercy of Vladimir Putin?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I thank my hon. Friend—that was well said.

The Conservative party left us with the highest energy prices that we have seen in a generation. That is a legacy that, quite frankly, should see them hang their heads in shame. Rather than criticising us for trying to unpick and deal with their legacies, I would strongly caution them to support our action. *[Interruption.]* It is their legacy!

My hon. Friend is right: the way that we get out of this bind, left by and inherited from the Conservative party, is through clean power, delivering renewables that we know are cheaper and clean power by 2030. My hon. Friend is right; the Conservative party continues to be misguided. Thankfully, we are in the driving seat.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call a member of the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee, Bradley Thomas.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): Rising energy costs affect not just households but industry. Sir Jim Ratcliffe has said that deindustrialising Britain is a false economy because it “shifts production and emissions elsewhere”. Can the Minister tell the House what is more important: chasing an arbitrary target or protecting industry and jobs?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: Businesses are under pressure from high energy prices. We know that. Again, I remind Conservative party Members that given their legacy, they should perhaps be a bit more humble about that. We are working with industry and it recognises that the way to drive down energy bills is through clean power. The Confederation of British Industry came out this week saying that our energy revolution is good for business. It is the route to lower energy costs for business and to creating jobs across the country. We have a plan, not just for energy bills but for jobs and the economy, which is rooted in clean energy, and that is much better than the legacy that we have inherited.

Nesil Caliskan (Barking) (Lab): Thousands of my constituents are still dealing with the cost of living crisis, finding themselves in debt because energy prices hit record levels under the previous Government. Energy prices continuing to go up makes those constituents' lives more difficult, so I welcome the Minister's statement. Will she, however, provide further reassurance about the immediate action the Government can take to regulate energy companies who are taking their customers for a ride, such as the thousands of my constituents who still do not have meters in their homes and who are being billed unlawfully for backdated energy and, in some cases, energy that they have not used? Will the Minister give the House further reassurance that there needs to be immediate action, as well as a long-term plan from the Government to see the transition to clean energy?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point out the cost of living crisis that blights constituencies across the country, with many people facing energy debt totalling £3.8 billion. She is also right, however, to point out that there are things that must be done to ensure that customers are served by the energy market. That is why we are ensuring that the regulator has the power—we are also instructing it to use the ones it has—to ensure that things such as back

[*Miatta Fahnbulleh*]

billing, which we know is an issue, do not happen. The rules are very clear and we need them to be enforced to ensure that when customers do not receive the best customer service from their suppliers, there are consequences. Our review of Ofgem is to ensure that it has the powers it needs to be that champion for consumers. In the end, the energy market must work in the interest of people. We agree that that is not happening at the moment and it must happen after we reform it.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): In the UK, electricity prices are linked to the global fossil fuel market, which is at the bottom of UK households' paying the highest energy costs in Europe. To fix that, the use of a single levy-controlled system has been suggested, with two simple rates—one for electricity and one for gas—set by Ministers. That would allow the Government to manage the cost for households and lower prices, especially for clean energy. Will the Minister look into that suggestion? I am happy to meet her to go through those details further.

Miatta Fahnbulleh: Our reform of the energy market arrangements looks at all the aspects of our electricity market that are not working. The Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen (Michael Shanks) is looking at that question and the Department is willing to work across the House to ensure we get to the right arrangements. As long as gas continues to drive the cost of energy, that will create a problem and have an impact on consumers. We are alive to that question and will report on that in due course.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement. I hear from many constituents who suffer with energy debt as a result of the previous Government's failure to protect billpayers during the energy crisis. Many of them are petrified, unable to move or change providers. I welcome the proposed acceleration of a debt relief scheme, but can the Minister provide more details on how that will help families in my constituency of Portsmouth North?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: We know that energy debt is a big problem. I have spoken to people across the country who are suffering with accumulated debt that they have no way of paying, with many having to forfeit energy as a consequence. Ofgem is consulting on a range of options, but at the heart of that is the principle that there needs to be a debt relief scheme. Whether we write off some of the energy debt that cannot be paid, or put in place payment plans, we want to ensure that those 1.8 million households have the opportunity to drive that debt in a way that means their energy will be sustainable. That is absolutely critical. It deals with the legacy of the energy crisis and the fact that many households have had to accumulate debt because they just could not pay £2,500. It is an important step and one that we are keen to support the regulator to deliver.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I entirely agree with the Government that, as the Minister said in her statement, we should not be "paying the price of our country being exposed to fossil fuel markets controlled by petrostates and dictators." Given that we cannot

move completely to clean energy tomorrow, why do the Government insist on closing down and, indeed, concreting over our potential fossil fuel gas reserves until such time as we can move completely to clean energy? Why should we import it from other states while piously saying that we will not extract it from beneath our own country?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: There will be a role for gas in our energy mix, but we are very clear that the route and the quickest way to getting ourselves off that dependence is through clean power. We have made a decision that we will put our energy into driving clean power by 2030. In the end, that is the quickest and best route to delivering for consumers and businesses and ensuring that we can deliver energy security, which we all, across the House, agree will deliver financial security for families across the country.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): I thoroughly welcome the statement, particularly on the reform of Ofgem and back billing. It is a key plank in the just transition as we move away from a rigged energy market that is totally reliant on imports of gas from dictators such as Putin. It is not, however, just about the transition to renewables. Does the Minister agree that in that transition we will also create hundreds of thousands of new green jobs right across the UK, including in Camborne, Redruth and Hayle, covering onshore wind, offshore wind, geothermal, tidal and solar?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. At the heart of this is the opportunity to create jobs and boost local economies across the country. That is good not just for our energy independence and family finances, but for every single part of our economy. That is why, rather than slowing down, we are committed to accelerating to deliver clean power by 2030.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Families and businesses obviously operate in an environment with lots of different costs. When they see increases in their tax bills, the burdens of potential new regulation and additional energy costs, they are bound to challenge themselves on what they can afford to invest. The Minister is clear on the Government's strategic direction, but does she not accept that in the short and medium term the burdens during the journey to change are enormous for business and will have a massive effect on the level of investment in this country? Does that not concern her?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I challenge the right hon. Member on this matter. Businesses are completely behind us because they can see that clean power is the route by which we reduce energy costs and, critically, create jobs and invest in our industry. That is good not just for people's pockets, and for dealing with the energy problem, which we know we have to deal with, and the affordability problem, but, ultimately, for the economy. It is good for business. This is a win-win situation. It is a shame that the Conservative party cannot see it, because it is obvious to us, obvious to industry, and obvious to businesses across the country. That is why we will continue to power forward with our plans.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): The previous Conservative Government abjectly failed to insulate our leaky homes and get our home heating systems ready to take advantage of the cheaper, clean energy that Labour

is now creating. In addition to the very welcome discount that the Minister has announced today, does she agree that Labour's plan to upgrade hundreds of thousands of homes with heat pumps and better insulation next year is a vital part of this Government's commitment to lowering household bills?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: My hon. Friend is completely right: the previous Government failed to insulate and upgrade enough homes to protect people from energy price hikes. Conservative Members are hanging their heads in shame and rightly so. She is also right that we are committed to upgrading hundreds of thousands of homes. That is critical. The way that we ensure that households are insulated from price rises and the way that we drive down prices is to upgrade those homes. That is a central part of our plan. We are already running at it with 300,000 homes in the coming year, but we will build on that, because we want to ensure that homes across the country benefit.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call a member of the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): Chopping and changing home upgrade schemes, as we saw under the previous Conservative Government, causes uncertainty and confusion, which is damaging for both consumers and installers alike. Will this Government avoid that mistake by setting out long-term plans for energy efficiency schemes that go beyond 2026?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: One hundred per cent. We need a long-term plan, so that every part of the system can respond to that. Our warm homes plan will try to set a long-term trajectory, so that we can marshal every part of the system necessary to deliver hundreds of thousands of upgrades, year in, year out.

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): May I welcome the Minister's announcement around the expansion of the warm home discount scheme? About 160,000 homes in my region will get £150 more help with their energy bills, but, clearly, the root cause of higher prices is higher natural gas prices, which have doubled since the election in July 2024. We know that natural gas is 50% to 75% more expensive than wind and solar, because the sun and the wind are free, and natural gas is not. Can the Minister assure me that we will get into clean energy by 2030, so that we can get our energy bills down for good?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I thank my hon. Friend for making the point so well. He is absolutely right that this is the route by which we can deliver cheaper energy. I can assure him that we are committed to driving this for the reasons that he said. This is the way that we break the stranglehold that we are in. This is the way that we get off this rollercoaster of price rises and price falls that is impacting households across the country. The commitment is there, and we are running with that commitment.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): Yet again, an Energy Minister comes to the House to tell us that they are moving at pace. The only thing moving at pace is the last shred of credibility from that Department as it talks about protecting consumers from higher energy prices. Let us not forget that this is the Labour party that stripped 900,000 Scottish pensioners

of their winter fuel payment, and that told us that fuel prices would go down £300, when they are now £600 higher than the level it promised they would be ahead of the election. Can the Minister explain three things to me? Did the Labour party profoundly misunderstand how energy in the United Kingdom works, or was it misleading the electorate? Why is it that the Minister is making such a big deal about Ofgem doing its actual job of getting after back billing? Should it not be doing that anyway? Why is that an announcement? Thirdly, when will consumers in GB finally see some response from this Government about higher energy bills?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I remind the hon. Member that the Scottish Government have jurisdiction in this area. We are working in collaboration with them to deliver this, but the Scottish Government do have responsibility in this area and he knows it. We are committed to bearing down on energy bills—of course we are. It is the central driving mission of everything that we are doing as a Government. It has been eight months. I hope that everyone can see from what we have done—whether it is removing the ban on onshore wind, whether it is a record-breaking auction, or whether it is the plans that we have to support the most vulnerable households—that we are running at this. We take our commitment seriously, and we are doing everything in our power to drive it. I suggest that the hon. Gentleman reminds his colleagues in Scotland that they should be using the power that they have, including with the warm home discount, to protect their consumers.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Minister's statement. This extra support will make a huge difference to residents in my constituency of Harlow. One of the issues with living in a post-war new town is that all the houses were built at roughly the same time, so the issues of insulation all appear at roughly the same time. At this morning's crisis summit, which I and the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade) attended, there was a strong feeling that cross-departmental communication is key to ensuring that funding gets to the people who need it the most. Does the Minister agree?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. That is why we are working with the Department for Work and Pensions and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and across Government, to target this support at households, so that we are helping people who we know are struggling.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): It was interesting to hear the Minister say how humble we on the Conservative Benches should be. Clearly, the Secretary of State for Energy, Security and Net Zero is so humble that he has not even bothered to turn up for this supposedly important statement. It is no more than a smokescreen, as we are seeing energy bills go up yet again. When will my constituents see the £300 energy cut that was promised by the Government? The Minister talked about international markets. Why on earth are this Government not looking again at drilling in the North sea? It is vital that we do so today; then, rather than just helping out a little bit with means-tested benefits, they could perhaps afford to do more for my constituents who are on £12,000 or £13,000 a year, and for pensioners who are losing their winter fuel payments this very year. Why will they not take a look at that?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: Given the legacy of the right hon. Gentleman's party, a bit more humility is warranted. We are committed to driving down energy bills. Everything that the Department is doing hinges on the central task of getting clean power. Everyone, including the regulator and industry, recognises that prices are going up because of our reliance on global fossil fuels. We are committed to dealing with that, and to providing support to the most vulnerable. We are taking action. The Conservatives were in power for 14 years and did absolutely nothing. Absolute shame on them.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement. Will my hon. Friend join me in praising the work of Citizens Advice teams, such as those that I have seen in my constituency of Rugby, who provide really useful support? They help people to navigate the numerous support schemes that the Government have put in place. They also deal with debt management and income maximisation. They are helping our constituents at a difficult time with the cost of living crisis that we inherited. Does she agree that this is valuable work that deserves our continuing support?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: My hon. Friend is completely right. Citizens Advice teams, and the network of third-party organisations and charities that they work with, are providing some of the most vital support to our constituents at a really difficult time. Citizens Advice is a key partner. We work with it and engage with it. I am going across the country meeting its teams, because we absolutely need their help to target support at the most vulnerable.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): I thank the Minister for her statement, but not for the madness contained within it. Recently, we have discovered a new gas field in Lincolnshire. We could frack the gas, yet we are still importing fracked gas from the United States, which is creating all sorts of mayhem in the atmosphere. Does the Minister agree that it would be better for the environment if we fracked our own gas, rather than importing it from America?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I am disappointed that the hon. Member did not listen to my statement. If he had listened to it properly, he would not have come up with that statement. Once again, there will be a mix, but we are clear that the quickest route to driving down energy bills is through clean power by 2030. That is sprinting at it. There is no other route to delivering energy security and financial security for our country. The industry is behind us on this, and we are working to deliver it.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the support in this statement, and the fact that 300,000 houses will be insulated in the next year. Does the Minister agree that the only long-term solution that will lead to energy security is our clean power plan? It will be good for areas like mine. The Confederation of British Industry pointed out yesterday that the green economy is growing three times quicker than the wider economy in this country. People want us to speed up, not slow down.

Miatta Fahnbulleh: My hon. Friend is 100% right. This is the route by which we will deliver for people's pockets and, critically, deliver the jobs that we need

across the country and boost our economy. We are clear-sighted about what needs to be done. It is a shame that the Conservative party is so blinkered.

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): We need to produce more energy at home from renewables and oil and gas, as we need a diverse energy mix in the UK. That will help us to deal with the volatile global energy markets. When will the Government change course and support the UK's oil and gas industry, including the cluster based in north-east Scotland, and issue new oil and gas licences to help bring down bills for residents across the country and in my constituency?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I direct the hon. Member to the clean power plan, and the analysis done on the way to deliver energy security. We are clear that this is the quickest and best route by which to do that. In the end, one thing guides what we do: the need to get lower bills for the long term. We believe that this is the way to do it. The rest of the system agrees with us, from the regulator through to NESO. Our job is to crack on and deliver that.

Tom Collins (Worcester) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement, which has practical steps to support people with their bills, and a long-term plan, delivered at speed, to transition to a resilient, sustainable, clean energy system that takes advantage of the incredible advances in renewables in recent years. Offshore wind is providing really low-cost power, underpinned by UK-led innovation in technologies such as hydrogen. The Minister has laid out ambitious plans for supporting households in upgrading their homes, and has made excellent early progress on those upgrades. Will she continue working in partnership with UK innovators and manufacturers to make it not just possible but easy for homeowners to keep their homes warm with dependable, clean and affordable energy?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: My hon. Friend is completely right. We are committed to working with industry on upgrading our homes. We believe that that is the way to drive down bills, but we need to make this as easy as possible for consumers across the country. We are working with industry and across the piece to deliver at pace.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I welcome many of the measures in the statement, although I echo the request from my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) that we consider decoupling electricity and gas prices; that would make such a difference. In 2023, Sutton council was blocked by the opposition Conservative group from partaking of an EU grant to help upgrade some of our council houses to energy performance certificate rating C. I welcome the warm homes social housing fund, but I encourage the Minister and the rest of the Government to increase the amounts available in these funds, so that we reward as often as possible councils that are ambitious to provide better, warmer homes for their residents.

Miatta Fahnbulleh: We are committed to working with local and regional government. We are increasing the support provided and are ensuring that it is long-term support, because we agree that the route to insulating

lots of homes is through partnerships with local and regional governments, to deliver homes that are warmer and cheaper to run.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Northern Ireland is the only region of this United Kingdom where the warm home discount scheme is not available. Since 2011, the UK Government have failed to grasp this issue. The reason given is that fuel poverty is a devolved issue, but the same can be said of Scotland and Wales. When the price increase in Northern Ireland is announced next week, the assistance will not be available. Will the Minister meet me to discuss this matter? Furthermore, will she open conversations with the Northern Ireland Executive about righting this wrong?

Miatta Fahnbulleh: We are reaching out to and working with the Northern Ireland Executive. I would be happy to meet on this issue.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Extending the warm home discount to all households that receive means-tested benefits could make a difference to many, especially those who have not received their winter fuel payment this winter. However, £150 off will not go far enough to help the 56% of adults in Wales likely to ration their energy over the next three months, according to National Energy Action Cymru. With the energy price cap rising again in April, will the Minister admit that we need long-term solutions that ensure energy affordability, such as the social energy tariff, which I have asked for since I came to this House last July, in order to support—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order.

Miatta Fahnbulleh: I agree that we need long-term solutions. That is why we have talked constantly about the clean power mission, and why we are clear that while we make the transition to clean power, we will support the most vulnerable households. As an important first step, we are extending support next winter to over 6 million people who we know are struggling. We will continue to build on that in the weeks and months ahead.

Points of Order

2.55 pm

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. During the statement on defence and security, the leader of the Scottish National party, the right hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn), described Reform UK MPs as Putin's puppets and said that they were missing from the Chamber during the statement. That is not true. I was present for the Prime Minister's statement, left for a comfort break and returned for the rest of the session. In fact, I have been in this Chamber for nearly four hours today. Funnily enough, when I returned to the Chamber, the leader of the SNP and his MPs were not actually present. The leader of the SNP has misled the House and should apologise, if you can find him.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order, although it was slightly longer than what he provided notice of. I have no doubt that he let the right hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Stephen Flynn) know that he would be speaking about him. The hon. Member should know that it is not appropriate to accuse other Members of misleading the House. As ever, it is vital that Members in all parts of the House maintain good temper and moderation in debate.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Many people will have become aware of the recent controversy regarding the BBC's decision to broadcast on its iPlayer service the documentary "Gaza: How to Survive a Warzone". It only withdraw it after public outcry. It featured the son of a Hamas deputy Minister, and there has been the further revelation in the past 24 hours that the cameraman on the film put up a celebratory tweet after the 7 October massacre. The Culture Secretary has already indicated publicly that she wants to speak to the director general of the BBC about this outrageous lack of due diligence, but has she indicated to the Speaker's Office that she intends to make a statement to the House, to allow right hon. and hon. Members to seek further clarification and get answers for the wider public?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order. I have not received any indication that a Minister intends to make a statement to the House on this matter, but Department for Culture, Media and Sport questions will be on Thursday, and I am sure that the Table Office can advise him on how to pursue this matter further.

BILL PRESENTED

CRIME AND POLICING BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Yvette Cooper, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Secretary Shabana Mahmood, Secretary Steve Reed, the Solicitor General and Dame Diana Johnson, presented a Bill to make provision about anti-social behaviour, offensive weapons, offences against people (including sexual offences), property offences, the criminal exploitation of persons,

sex offenders, stalking and public order; to make provision about powers of the police, the Border Force and other similar persons; to make provision about confiscation; to make provision about the police; to make provision about terrorism and national security, and about international agreements relating to crime; to make provision about the criminal liability of bodies; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 187) with explanatory notes (Bill 187-EN).

River Wye (Cleaning)

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

2.58 pm

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the Secretary of State to publish and implement a plan for cleaning and improving the water quality of the River Wye; and for connected purposes.

As shadow Leader of the House, I am rarely allowed to speak on behalf of my constituents from the Back Benches, so this ten-minute rule motion is a priceless opportunity for me to highlight a vital issue of both local and national significance—the plight of the River Wye. The Wye is one of the most beautiful and ecologically significant rivers in the UK. Rising from the slopes of Plynlimon in mid-Wales, it winds its way via Hay-on-Wye and Hereford on to Ross-on-Wye before heading down to Symonds Yat, Monmouth, Tintern and the Severn estuary.

The Wye valley, too, is renowned for its beauty. It is a special area of conservation with two sites of special scientific interest. The river is thus a vital part not only of the local economy in Herefordshire but of our landscape, our culture and our heritage as a nation. Admired since Roman times, the river is one of the birthplaces of British tourism, the origin of the movement known as the picturesque and the inspiration for some of the finest poetry in the English language, yet in recent years it has faced huge environmental pressures, particularly from high phosphate levels, which have harmed water quality and aquatic life.

The rapid growth of certain farming sectors, including poultry, has brought economic benefits but also placed additional strain on the river. As well as agricultural run-off, sewage and waste water discharges and changes in land management have contributed to the problem. Those pressures have been compounded by rises in water temperature and changes to seasonal water flow. Many of those specific problems and their interactions are still not fully understood, so there is a real need for proper research.

Building on the work of Councillor Elissa Swinglehurst and the Wye and Usk Foundation among many others, I first highlighted this issue in September 2020. From the start I pressed the agencies—the Environment Agency, Natural England and Natural Resources Wales—for a collective response and called on them to produce a cross-border, all-catchment long-term action plan.

In June 2021, working with other catchment MPs at the time, I invited the national agencies and the local councils on both sides of the border to a special meeting devoted to the issue. In October 2021, I co-ordinated a letter from Wye catchment MPs to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury calling for a specific spending package devoted to the Wye in the 2021 three-year spending review. The result, notwithstanding lockdowns and other pandemic delays, was the Hereford Shell Store meeting of July 2022 and the setting up of the Wye phosphates working group, whose terms of reference were then adopted—very much with my support—by a phosphates commission established by the four local authorities. All those things helped to bring people and groups together.

In the course of that work, I am pleased to say we also had one major win of substance. I had called for the proceeds of fines on water companies to be ringfenced and devoted to a new national rivers recovery fund. In November 2022, the Government accepted that ringfencing.

In relation to the Wye, it is important to be aware that much good work has been done on the ground. The cross-border nutrient management board has carefully assessed and assembled a range of potentially useful measures. Thanks to detailed assessment work with Welsh Water, it now looks as though local sewage and waste water discharges will be brought within national standards—though only by the early 2030s, which is still far too slow. The community response on both sides of the border has been magnificent, with hundreds of volunteer citizen scientists actively taking weekly water readings under the aegis of the Friends of the Wye and other organisations.

At the national level, I am sorry to say that progress in addressing these issues has been painfully slow. For years, the creation of a high-level catchment-wide plan, essential to managing this cross-border issue, was impeded by political differences between the Welsh and UK Governments. Meanwhile, the regulatory agencies struggled to enforce existing environmental protections effectively. Finally, after three ministerial visits, including one by the then Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to Hereford in June 2023, we managed to secure publication of the River Wye action plan last year. That at least covered the English part of the river, and £35 million was reallocated from within existing DEFRA budgets to fund mitigations and the development of an integrated long-term recovery strategy.

The then Government also announced that they had appointed a new river champion, whose job it was to lead the detailed planning work in collaboration with key stakeholders on both sides of the border. The plan for the Wye was by no means perfect, but for the first time it provided a framework, badly needed money to support projects and research, and a named person to help drive things forward on the ground. It was therefore deeply disappointing when the plan was dropped by the new Government after the general election, alongside the idea of the river champion.

It is still more disappointing that the Treasury is also now rowing back on the previous Government's commitment to ringfence money from fines on water companies and use them for a river restoration fund. That is a massive step backwards. Water companies

have paid many tens of millions of pounds in fines since 2022 alone. That money should go back into saving our rivers.

What is to be done? Protecting and restoring the Wye requires a long-term, collaborative approach, as I have highlighted. The UK and Welsh Governments, the agencies, farmers, businesses, local authorities, environmental groups and local people all have a role to play in developing a strategy that balances economic sustainability with environmental responsibility. While I am very glad that my colleague the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns) is sponsoring the Bill, it is a great pity that other Wye catchment MPs have chosen not to. Indeed, I do not notice a single Wye catchment MP in the Chamber; a great sadness.

The Bill is clear and simple in its intent. It would for the first time require the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in law to publish and implement a plan for cleaning and improving the water quality of the River Wye. That is a measure that every MP of every constituency inside or outside the Wye catchment should be enthusiastic to support. Solutions must include better land management, improved water treatment, effective incentives for sustainable farming and stronger oversight and enforcement.

The Wye catchment 2025 management plan is designed to cover not just water quality but biodiversity loss and flood and drought vulnerability. The nutrient management board provides an important framework of public accountability in relation to measures affecting nutrients and water quality. In other words, many of the key clean-up measures and mitigations are well understood. What we need now is action. We need an end to delay. We need political leadership from Ministers on both sides of the border, a shared determination to address this vital national issue with the seriousness it deserves, and the funding—the £35 million cut from the plan for the Wye—to make it happen.

The River Wye is a true national treasure. It requires not just short-term measures but a sustained, collective effort led by the UK and Welsh Governments to ensure that this magnificent river is fully restored to health as swiftly as that can be achieved.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Jesse Norman and Ellie Chowns present the Bill.

Jesse Norman accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 July, and to be printed (Bill 186).

Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (Transfer of Functions etc) Bill [Lords]

Second Reading

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The reasoned amendment in the name of Ian Sollom has been selected.

3.8 pm

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

We are a country of incredible talent and enterprise; a country of industry and invention. Our universities lead the world. Our colleges deliver excellence to hundreds of thousands up and down the country. British companies founded on great ideas export their products across the globe. Our strengths range from research to manufacturing and from professional services to creative industries, yet there remains a wide and growing gap between where we are now and what I know our great country is capable of, because, despite our many strengths, there are skills missing from our workforce.

There are skills missed by people who want to get on in life, get better training to land that great job and earn a decent living; skills missed by our employers, with businesses, hospitals, labs and factories held back; skills missed by so many of our communities, with towns and cities left behind as industry has moved on; and skills missed by our country. Those skills are vital to the security and growth that this Labour Government are so determined to deliver.

Our latest data shows us that half a million vacancies sit empty simply because employers struggle to find the right staff with the right skills: the most since we started collecting the data in 2011. That is half a million jobs not filled, half a million careers not boosted and half a million opportunities not taken—a tragic waste that this country simply cannot afford. But I am sorry to say that this is not surprising. We have fallen behind our neighbours on higher technical qualifications—the ones that sit just below degree level, but which can lead to well-paid, fulfilling careers for software developers, civil engineering technicians or construction site supervisors.

Over 90% of employers value basic digital skills in their job candidates, but more than 7 million adults lack them. Our skills gaps deal our people and our country a double blow. They hold back the economic growth we need to invest in our public services and drive national prosperity, and they hold back the ambitions of working people who deserve the chance not just to get by but to get on. They deny them the opportunity, the power and the freedom to choose the life they want to live.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): Would the Secretary of State agree that one of the difficulties is that employers cannot spend the money from the apprenticeship levy easily, and that too much of that money is retained by the Treasury? Will she undertake to speak to the Chancellor to see whether she could make it easier for employers to spend that money on training?

Bridget Phillipson: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the Chancellor is as committed as I am to ensuring that we have the right skills within the economy, because without them we will not be able to deliver the economic

growth that is the No. 1 mission of this Labour Government. But we are committed to reforming the failing apprenticeship levy, reforming the system and converting it into a growth and skills levy with more flexibility for employers. As a first step, this will include shorter-duration and foundation apprenticeships in targeted sectors, making sure that we are working more effectively with employers in order for our economy to grow.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I welcome the commitment to skills that the Secretary of State is articulating, but will she recognise that too often the advice given to young people, particularly from schools, is to pursue an academic career—I use the word “academic” in the loosest possible sense—rather than to engage in practical learning? That means that while the shortages she describes are profound, there are also many people who are graduates in non-graduate jobs owing a lot of money and with pretty useless degrees.

Bridget Phillipson: I was almost on the point of saying that I agreed with much of what the right hon. Gentleman had to say, but unfortunately he went and ruined it at the end with that comment about the value of university education and of having the chance to gain a degree. Where I do share common cause with him is that I want to make sure that all young people have a range of pathways available to them, including fantastic technical training routes, including through apprenticeships, but I also want to make sure that young people with talent and ability are able to take up a university course if that is the right path and the right choice for them.

As we were recently celebrating National Apprenticeship Week, I took the opportunity to see across the country some of the fantastic routes that are available in areas such as construction and nuclear, with really wonderful job opportunities and careers where young people are able to make fantastic progress.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I had the opportunity to visit Harlow College during National Apprenticeship Week, and I really agree with the points that my right hon. Friend is making. Does she agree that if we are to achieve the new homes targets that we really want to achieve and get people off the streets and into those homes, we need to train those apprentices now and that Skills England can be part of that future?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I know how much he champions, in his constituency and in the House, opportunities for young people to have the chance to take on new skills, including through apprenticeship routes. Where it comes to construction, he is right to say that there are fantastic opportunities out there. It was heartening, during some of my visits during National Apprenticeship Week, to see the fantastic contribution that women play in construction, breaking down some of the stereotypes that exist about the right opportunities, and to meet some amazing engineering apprentices and bricklaying apprentices. Those women are really trailblazing in an industry that is often very male-dominated.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): On the subject of construction, does my right hon. Friend agree that a huge amount of the construction industry is made up of small employers and that one of the biggest failings of

the apprenticeship levy approach has been that small and medium-sized enterprises have been shut out? We have had a 50% reduction in the number of SMEs offering apprenticeships since the introduction of the levy. How will she increase the number of SMEs that are able to offer apprenticeships? If the major employers are the ones that have all the budget, how do we ensure that we increase the number of SME apprenticeships?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend has a long-standing interest in this area and has consistently raised not only the challenges faced by small businesses but the opportunities to create more apprenticeship starts and more training routes for people across our country. One of the changes that we set out during National Apprenticeship Week was to the maths and English requirements for adult apprentices, which will make a big difference to employers large and small and was welcomed by business, but he is right to say that much more is needed to help smaller employers and small contractors to take on apprentices. That is the work that Skills England will drive forward and that is why this Bill is such a crucial development.

The skills gaps that we face in our country deny people the opportunity, the power and the freedom to choose the life that they want to live. But it is not just today that we count the cost; those gaps limit our power to shape the careers, the economy and the society of tomorrow as well. Only with the right skills can people take control of their future, and only with the right skills system can we drive the growth that this country needs. It is time this country took skills seriously again: no longer an afterthought, but now at the centre of change; no longer a nice to have, but now a driving force for opportunity; no longer neglected, but now a national strength.

There is much to celebrate. Plenty of colleges go above and beyond, plenty of employers are ready to contribute and plenty of people are eager to upskill, but our system needs reform. Too many people have been sidelined and left without the skills to seize opportunity. One in eight young people are not in employment, education or training. We can, and we must, do more to break down the barriers to learning that too many people still face. We need a system that is firing on all cylinders.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The figure in Stoke-on-Trent is even more stark, with 22% of young people not in education, employment or training. We have a wonderful ecosystem of colleges, with Stoke sixth form college, Stoke-on-Trent college and the University of Staffordshire, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) said, we also have small and medium-sized organisations. Can the Secretary of State set out how this Bill will help an organisation such as the Spark Group, run by Dan Canavan, to tap into opportunities in order to spread his ability to help those young people into well-paid jobs in my community?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend names a fantastic business in his constituency and the contribution that it makes. There is a lot more that we need to do to support smaller employers to be in a stronger position to benefit from apprenticeships.

This Bill will bring together the many disparate parts of a very fragmented system, which employers, particularly smaller employers, often find hard to navigate the right way through, and are not always clear about the best training and qualification routes in order to find the people that they need. Also, the changes we have made to English and maths in particular will support employers to create 10,000 additional apprenticeships every single year. This was a call that we heard loud and clear from employers, and it is a simple, straightforward change that will open up opportunities for people across our country. They will still have the English and maths standards as part of their apprenticeship, but they will no longer be held back by some of the red tape that has denied them the chance to get on in life.

The skills system that we have right now is too fragmented, too confusing and too tangled up across too many organisations. There is no single source of truth, no single organisation able to zoom out and see the big problems and no single authority able to bring the sector together to solve them. The result is a system that amounts to less than the sum of its parts. For young people, it can be hard to know where the opportunities lie. Adults looking to upskill or reskill and working people hoping for a fresh start are too often met with confusion, not clarity. They are presented with a muddling mix of options when they need clear pathways to great careers.

It is no better for employers. They tell us that the system is difficult to navigate and slow to respond. They tell us that they are too often shut out of course design and that their voices are too often not heard. The result is frustration. Learners and employers are frustrated, and they are right to be frustrated. Many businesses do a good job of investing in the skills of their workforce, but others simply are not spending enough.

Investment is at its lowest since 2011 at just half the EU average. We must empower businesses to reverse the trend by investing in their employees, and for that, we need to move forward. There will always remain a strong and galvanising role for competition, but where it is harmful, adds complexity, duplicates efforts or twists incentives, we will balance it with supportive co-ordination to ensure that all parts of the system are pulling in the right direction.

Here is our vision and the change we need. From sidelined to supported, we need a system that helps everyone so that businesses can secure the skilled workforce they need. From fragmented to coherent, we need a system defined by clear and powerful pathways to success and towards effective co-ordination. We also need a system of partnership with everyone pulling together towards the same goals. That is the change that Skills England will oversee.

This Labour Government are a mission-led Government with a plan for change, and skills are essential to Labour's missions to drive economic growth and break down the barriers to opportunity. In fact, skills go way beyond that. Skills training contributes across our society, and great skills training driven by Skills England, supported by my Department, guided by the wisdom of colleges, universities, businesses, mayors and trade unions, and directed by national priorities and local communities is the skills system we need. It is a system that will drive forward all our missions. It will help us fix our NHS, create clean energy and deliver safer streets.

[Bridget Phillipson]

Skills are the fuel that will drive a decade of national renewal, which is vital for our plan for change. That is why earlier this month we unveiled our plans to help thousands more apprentices to qualify every year. That means more people with the right skills in high-demand sectors from social care to construction and beyond. We have listened to what businesses have told us. We will shorten the minimum length of apprenticeships and put employers in charge of decisions on English and maths requirements for adults.

Last November, the Government announced £140 million of investment in homebuilding skills hubs. Once fully up to speed, the hubs will deliver more than 5,000 fast-track apprenticeships a year, helping to build the extra homes that the people of this country desperately need. We are driving change for our skills system, and Skills England is leading the charge. It will assess the skills needed on the ground regionally and nationally now and in the years to come. Where skills evolve rapidly and where new and exciting technologies are accelerating from AI to clean energy, Skills England will be ready to give employers the fast and flexible support they need.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I represent a coastal community. Coastal communities have been forgotten over the past 14 years almost as much as the skills agenda. In my constituency, Bournemouth and Poole college led by Phil Sayles, who is doing incredible work, is about to open the green energy construction campus in April, which will enable solar, heat pump and rainwater capture skills to be taught to apprentices and trainees. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the college, and does she agree that colleges like that one are critical to achieving clean power by 2030?

Bridget Phillipson: I am delighted to hear my hon. Friend's experience from Bournemouth. Our colleges are a crucial part of how we ensure that we have the skills we need in our economy, but also how we will drive forward our agenda on clean energy. He is also right to identify the enormous opportunities for jobs, growth and training, as well as, crucially, the imperative of ensuring that we have stability and security in our energy supply, so that never again are we so exposed to the fluctuations of energy markets that happened because of the invasion of Ukraine.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I want to amplify the valuable skills that our colleges are teaching in renewable technologies. I recently visited South Thames college in Wandsworth, where I saw the labs it has set up to teach the installation of heat pumps and other renewable technologies. The main challenge that the college faces is finding staff to teach the classes and to take on the apprentices and all the other learners. What support will the Government give to colleges to ensure that they can recruit experienced individuals to pass on those skills to the apprentices, so that we can provide the workforces that we dearly need?

Bridget Phillipson: The hon. Gentleman is right about the challenges across the further education sector. Sadly, we know those challenges all too well after 14 years of failure under the Conservatives. We recognise the enormous

opportunity that comes from investing in our fantastic colleges. That is why at the Budget we announced an extra £300 million of additional revenue for further education and £300 million of new capital investment. That also builds on our investment to extend targeted retention incentive payments of up to £6,000 after tax to eligible early career FE teachers in key subject areas. Our FE sector will have a crucial role to play in our mission for growth and opportunity, and he is right to draw attention to that.

Skills England will be ready to give employers the fast and flexible support they need. While updates to courses in the past have been sluggish and left behind by new technology, the Bill will help us keep up with the pace of change. Skills England will draw on high-quality data. It will design courses that are demand-led and shaped from the ground up by employers. Employers should be in no doubt that they will have a critical role in course design and delivery. That is why I have appointed Phil Smith to chair Skills England. Phil brings a wealth of business expertise from his two decades leading Cisco and will ensure that employers are at the heart of Skills England. I have appointed Sir David Bell as vice-chair, drawing on his wealth of experience across education and Whitehall. I have also appointed Tessa Griffiths and Sarah Maclean as chief executive on a job-share basis, with Gemma Marsh as deputy chief executive. They will provide strong, independent leadership to move the skills system forward. Skills England will be held accountable by an independent board, and the Bill requires a report to be published and laid before Parliament, setting out the impact on technical education and apprenticeships of the exercise of the functions in the measure.

The clear relationship between the Department and Skills England is governed by a public framework document, which will be published for all to see. It will be a core constitutional document produced in line with guidance from the Treasury, making clear the different roles of my Department and Skills England. Skills England will reach across the country. It will not be trapped in Whitehall but spread to every town and city, because growth and employment must benefit every part of the country, not just where it is easy to drive growth. That means being ambitious, especially in areas that have been overlooked for decades, because talent and aspiration are no less present in those places.

Skills England will drive co-ordinated action to meet regional and national skills needs at all levels and in all places. It will work closely with mayoral strategic authorities and local and regional organisations, and it will connect with counterparts in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Skills England will simplify the system by combining functions within one powerful body and pulling together the disparate strands of Departments, local leaders, colleges, universities and training providers and weaving them into a coherent offer for businesses and learners alike.

To see why the skills revolution is so important for growth and why we must take skills seriously again, we should look no further than the UK's stalling productivity over the last decade and a half, dragging down our economy and cutting off hopes of higher incomes for workers. The skills system is central because, despite all its problems, the expansion of workforce skills drove a third of average annual productivity growth between

2001 and 2019. Here we have a chance. Here we see what is at stake. If we get this right by investing in our people and backing Skills England, we can drive productivity and get economic growth back on track. At the same time, we can give working people power and choice because that is what good skills can offer: the chance for them to take control of their careers and take advantage of the opportunities that our economy will create. That is why Skills England will work to support the forthcoming industrial strategy unveiled by the Chancellor last November. The next phase of its work will provide further evidence on the strategy's eight growth-driving sectors: advanced manufacturing, clean energy, the creative industries, defence, digital, financial services, life sciences, and professional and business services. Added to those are two more: construction and healthcare.

Skills England will work closely with the Industrial Strategy Council, which will monitor the strategy's progress against clear objectives.

Mr Perkins: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way again. She is speaking incredibly powerfully and passionately about the role of Skills England, and I share her commitment and excitement about it, but as she knows, this IfATE Bill abolishes IfATE rather than creating Skills England. There were those who believed that putting Skills England on a statutory footing as an independent body, rather than keeping it in the Department, might have been the way to go. Will she explain to the House why she has taken this approach, and why she believes that Skills England will, as a body in her Department rather than as a truly independent body, have the strength and respect in the sector that it so badly needs?

Bridget Phillipson: I will set out the reason primarily and then say a little about the way in which Skills England will operate. First, the need to do it in this way is one of time and speed. As I hope I have set out to the House, the need to act is urgent; we must get on with this and ensure that we tackle the chronic skills shortages right across our country—there is no time to waste. The Government are determined to drive opportunity and growth in every corner of our country. Further delays to that will hold back not just growth but opportunities.

When it comes to the function of Skills England and how it will operate, it will be an Executive agency of the Department for Education. It will have the independence that it needs to perform its role effectively, with a robust governance and accountability framework and a chair who brings an enormous wealth of experience from business. A strong, independent board, chaired by Phil Smith, will balance operational independence with proximity to Government. It will operate in the same way that many Executive agencies, such as the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, already operate.

As with any new arm's length body, in the next 18 to 24 months we will review how Skills England is functioning, to consider whether it still exists within the best model. *[Interruption.]* That is entirely in keeping with the way in which arm's length bodies are routinely considered by the Government. I am surprised that Conservative Members are surprised, because that is simply how these things are done, as they know all too well. If they are content to allow drift and delay, they will hold back

opportunity for people across our country; they will hold back the demand that businesses rightly lay at our door to get on with the job of creating the conditions in which they can deliver more apprenticeship starts, more opportunities, and more chances to learn and upskill.

Skills England will work closely with the Industrial Strategy Council, which will monitor the strategy's progress against clear objectives. The Skills England chair will have a permanent seat on the council—that really matters. By 2035 there will be at least 1.4 million new jobs. Our clean energy mission will rely on talented people with the expertise to power our greener future. The pace of technological change, including artificial intelligence, is accelerating, and it brings huge opportunities for our economy. However, to seize those opportunities, firms need a ready supply of people with the right skills. We will nurture home-grown talent in all regions so that people have the skills they need for those exciting jobs of the future.

Skills England will work with the Migration Advisory Committee to ensure that training in England accounts for the overall need of the labour market and to reduce the reliance of some sectors on labour from abroad.

Gareth Snell: I thank the Secretary of State for being so generous with her time. I absolutely support her ambition of ensuring that we have the skills for the jobs of the future. Will she say a little about how Skills England will support foundational manufacturing industries, such as ceramics in Stoke-on-Trent, which will not be prioritised in the industrial strategy but still have a lot to offer our economy and are crying out for skills from local people? If we can get that right, we can grow our own economy, and that is true levelling up in my opinion.

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend always champions the ceramics industry in his constituency. We have had many conversations on that topic, and he is absolutely right to put it into context. Skills England will benefit the ceramics industry and his constituents because we will be able to move much more rapidly to make changes to qualifications and training requirements in order to meet the needs of employers, with further flexibility, shorter courses, and foundation apprenticeships for young people for the chance to get on, including in long-standing traditional industries as well as in future jobs and opportunities.

The Bill is a crucial leap forward, bringing the different parts of the skills system closer together, and it paves the way for Skills England. It transfers the current functions of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education to the Secretary of State, not to exercise power from Westminster, but to empower the expert leadership of Skills England to drive the change we need. Bringing those functions to Skills England will place the content and design of technical qualifications at the heart of our skills system, where they belong.

Skills England has existed in shadow form since Labour took power and began the work of change in July. It set out its first "state of the nation" report into skills gaps in our economy in September. Skills England is moving ahead. The leadership is in place, and by laying the groundwork for a swift transition to Skills England, we are moving a step closer towards a joined-up skills system.

[Bridget Phillipson]

At its heart, this Bill is about growth and opportunity—growth for our economy, and opportunity for our people—and there is no time to waste. We need action, not delay. The people of this country need better jobs, higher wages and brighter futures; no more vacancies unfilled due to a lack of skills, no more chances missed and no more growth lost. We need change now, not change pushed back to some foggy future, so we are pushing ahead.

This is legislation that builds on what has come before but demands more—more cohesion, more dynamism and more ambition. That is how we break down the barriers to opportunity, that is how we fire up the engines of economic growth, and that is how we deliver the future that this country deserves—the bright hope that our best days lie ahead of us. I commend this Bill to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

3.35 pm

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): I rise to speak on a piece of legislation that poses more risks than benefits and proves that there is not parity of esteem for technical and academic qualifications within the Government. The Secretary of State is putting forward a Bill that allows her personally to write each apprenticeship assessment. Just in case you think I am exaggerating, Madam Deputy Speaker, we can see it in the explanatory notes. The Bill provides

“the option for each standard and apprenticeship assessment plan to be prepared by the Secretary of State”.

Madam Deputy Speaker, can you imagine the outcry if this was done with history GCSEs? If it were a Conservative Government taking these powers, there would be howls of outrage from the Labour party. It is extraordinary that the Government are, contrary to the words of the Secretary of State today, cutting out employers and giving sole discretion to the Secretary of State. They would not allow it with academic qualifications; we must not allow it with vocational ones.

I acknowledge the statement made in the other place about clarifying the situations when the Government envisage the Secretary of State intervening, but the specific criteria for using this power should be on the face of the Bill. At the moment, the Secretary of State has carte blanche to do whatever she likes, and we know from the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill that that is a very bad idea. Can the Minister confirm that there will be some restrictions, and will the Government put those on the face of the Bill?

The Bill is another manifestation of the Department for Education’s centralisation spree. As with the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill, everything must be controlled by the Secretary of State, and no innovation is allowed. The Bill abolishes the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education—shortened to IfATE—and transfers its functions to the Secretary of State, in effect absorbing them into the Department for Education. The Government say that they will set up Skills England, but there are no details on the plans for Skills England in the Bill, or on how the Government’s proposed changes to the funding of skills-based qualifications will work in practice.

Simply creating a new agency will not address any of the issues that we need to address within the skills system. Even putting aside my severe doubts about the wisdom of progressing down this road in the first place, the very least the Government could provide the House with is some information on Skills England itself in the Bill. The only thing we know from debates in the other place—the Secretary of State has confirmed it today—is that Skills England will not be on a statutory footing and therefore will unquestionably be less independent than IfATE. Can the Secretary of State explain why this is an improvement?

This matters because the framework document published in the autumn is, at best, vague and, at worst, silent on the role of employers. There are some statements in the section on aims saying that employers will be engaged in the preparation of occupational standards, but it does not say how. Does the Secretary of State think that she knows better than employers? I urge her to explain why employers are so much less visible in the framework document, or to agree to amend the Bill. Reducing the role of employers will harm the apprenticeship system.

The change will also create unnecessary turmoil in the skills system. A cross-party amendment was passed in the other place to try to minimise the impact that this uncertain upheaval will have. The amendment will delay the provisions of the Bill to ensure that Skills England has time to set up before taking on its role and to ensure that the administrative duties do not get in the way of providing quality apprenticeships. That seems the bare minimum of what we would expect, and I hope the Government will not oppose that amendment, because to do so would be absurd.

The skills system needs a stable landscape, but the Bill presents real risks with no obvious benefits: risks that the Government will erode standards in our skills system by removing the relationship with the employer and replacing it with diktat from the Secretary of State; risks of poor leadership by replacing a good organisation, which is liked by employers and apprentices, with an unknown and undefined body.

Mr Perkins: I am listening carefully to the right hon. Lady. She seems to be evangelising the role of IfATE, but I have heard far stronger criticisms of it than she appears to make. Is her position that IfATE does not have many faults and should carry on the way it is, or does she think that the organisation’s remit has grown and is vague, and most employers feel that it is a block to getting the standards they need, rather than the vehicle for that, as she seems to suggest?

Laura Trott: I have huge respect for the hon. Gentleman and thought his earlier question was spot on. There is much that needs to be improved, but that is much less vague than Skills England, which is what we have in front of us at the moment. There are risks of distraction, with the time and cost involved in creating a new agency in the Department for Education. If the Government were serious about progressing quickly with the urgent strategic issues that I accept are needed in skills reform, the most effective step would be to build on the success of IfATE, rather than dismantling it. Instead, the Bill threatens to undo much of the progress made under successive Conservative Governments in building a world-class apprenticeships and technical education system. It

is fiddling for no reason, change for no purpose and, as is so often the case with this Government, the opposite of what is required.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Chair of the Education Committee.

3.41 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The further education and skills sector is of strategic importance, and equipping our workforce with the skills that employers need is critical for economic growth. Ensuring that there are opportunities for young people and those mid-career to access high-quality training in order to enhance and develop their skills is vital for breaking down the barriers to opportunity that hold back far too many people. For far too long, the further education and skills sector has been the Cinderella service of our education system, patronised with lip service about how important it is, always regarded as second best, and never allocated the level of funding needed to really deliver.

Despite the fact that at the very peak only around one third of 18-year-olds go on to university, our school system is overwhelmingly orientated to communicate to young people that university is the option they should all aim for, rather than supporting a plurality of education options post-18, all of which can equip them well for a successful career. That has created a postcode lottery in which the high-quality further education and training opportunities that are available in some parts of the country are not available everywhere.

Sir John Hayes: The hon. Lady is making a profoundly important point that reinforces what I said earlier about careers advice and guidance. When I was skills Minister, I introduced a statutory duty on providers to make available free and independent advice. The problem is that that is often done by means of the internet. Schools will refer students to the internet, rather than bring people such as independent advisers into the school to guide them. She is right that the best solution to the problem she sets out is exactly that kind of involvement from careers advisers with students.

Helen Hayes: I thank the right hon. Member for his intervention. I was delighted recently to visit a school in my constituency, and a careers fair that gave young people the opportunity to meet many employers and providers of further education face to face, in order to give real meaning and reality to what such opportunities might provide in the future. It is important that young people have those opportunities.

Recently, I was delighted to visit the Lambeth college campus in Vauxhall, which is part of the Southbank University group, with my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall and Camberwell Green (Florence Eshalomi). We met young people engaged in cutting-edge training in robotics, renewable energy installation, dental technology and game design and production. They were being equipped with valuable skills to help them to access high-quality jobs, with the possibility, in some cases, of progressing their training all the way to degree level at the university.

The college is a good example of a strategic vision being applied to skills at a local level to ensure that employers' needs are being met, and that the best possible

opportunities are made available to young people, but not everywhere can benefit from such a strategic approach at present. I therefore welcome the Bill, which will formally establish Skills England. It is encouraging that this Government are giving further education and skills the strategic prominence they need, and seeking to establish an effective national agency to deliver a step change in the strategy that underpins our approach to skills and the quality and availability of training opportunities.

Skills England has been operating in shadow form within the Department for Education since July last year. Following the passage of the Bill, it will become an executive agency. This important Bill will work to underpin many of the strategic aims of the Government, including the delivery of economic growth, the skills to provide the additional 1.5 million homes that need to be built, and the skills to drive the urgently needed transition of our energy sector to achieve net zero, and the much-needed improvements in our national health service and in social care.

As the first Skills England report highlights, we currently have a fragmented and confusing landscape that lets down learners, frustrates businesses and holds back growth. The current system that the Government inherited has been badly neglected and urgent action is needed to deliver the change and scale of ambition required.

While I welcome the Bill, there are a number of issues on which I would be grateful for further clarity from the Government. The Bill does not provide a statutory underpinning for Skills England, meaning that the Secretary of State and future Secretaries of State can make fundamental changes to Skills England or close it down without the consent of Parliament. That calls into question the ability of Skills England to deliver a stable long-term underpinning of the skills system over a period of time. I understand the Government's urgency, but it is important that in delivering this change Skills England is placed on a really solid foundation.

In order to be effective in delivering the skills system that our country needs, Skills England will need to have leverage with a number of different Government Departments beyond the Department for Education, yet the chief executive of Skills England is the equivalent of a director-level post in the civil service, not a director general, calling into question the extent to which appropriately senior people from across Government will be required to act on its recommendations and work in effective partnership. As the Bill progresses, the Government should consider the seniority of the CEO in that light.

Partnership working with key stakeholders outside Government, including training providers, trade unions, employers and devolved authorities will also be critical to the success of Skills England, but none of that is written into the Bill, and the ways in which Skills England will be held accountable for effective partnership working are unclear. Will the Secretary of State take further action to address that?

The impact statement for the Bill states that there may be a drop in apprenticeship starts while the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education's functions are transferred to the Secretary of State and then to Skills England, with a disproportionate impact on adult apprenticeships, disadvantaged learners and disadvantaged

[Helen Hayes]

regions. Will the Secretary of State explain what steps she will take to minimise and mitigate that potential short-term drop?

The success of Skills England will depend on a series of wider factors that should be considered at the point at which it is being established. There is a significant issue with the funding of sixth form colleges, particularly around inequities in pay between teachers in schools and colleges, exacerbated by the failure to extend the recent pay increase to teachers to those employed by colleges. It cannot be right that a teacher in a college can be paid less than a teacher in a school sixth form for teaching exactly the same subject.

To drive parity of esteem between pupils following an academic route and those following a vocational route, it is important that sixth form colleges are able to both recruit and retain teachers. That means addressing the lower pay in sixth form colleges compared with schools, and the gap between teacher salaries and the salaries that teachers could receive in industry. It is a real problem for colleges seeking to recruit teachers of vocational subjects that those who have the skills to teach trade can often earn far more by practising that trade in the private sector. There is currently very little obligation on industry to release staff to deliver vocational education or to help to secure the pipeline of vocational teachers, including through post-retirement options. The Government should give further consideration to the recruitment and retention of high-quality teachers in the further education sector.

For some students in the further education sector, their school days have not been the happiest days of their lives. College or an apprenticeship should be the place where they start to find the things that they can excel at and where their confidence is built because they start to succeed. The importance of a functional level of English and maths is universally accepted and understood, so something is badly wrong in our education system when 38% of students do not achieve a grade 3 or above in English and maths at GCSE. The cycle of failure ends up continuing in the FE sector, which requires them to resit again and again. There must be a better way to ensure the functional skills in these subjects that employers need within further education, while enabling young people genuinely to succeed, build their confidence and thrive.

Finally, I will raise the issue of the huge differential in the information provided to sixth form students as they decide on their next steps after school or college—a point made by the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) earlier in the debate. When meeting with skills providers and school leaders in my constituency recently, many participants highlighted how a move to university was often presented as a natural, secure step, with multiple options and a well-trodden path through the UCAS process, while vocational options, including apprenticeships and degree apprenticeships, were not presented with the same clarity or coherence, or even within the same timeframe. That makes it harder for teachers to advise their students and for parents to have confidence in pathways that may appear less predictable and secure. If we want to see true parity of esteem between academic and vocational routes, that needs to change, and I hope that it will be a priority for the newly established Skills England.

The Education Committee recognises the strategic importance of further education and skills, and we have recently launched a substantial inquiry that aims to understand how the further education system can better equip young people with skills and qualifications for a range of sectors experiencing labour shortages while opening up a wider range of opportunities to young people and mid-career switchers. We will make our recommendations to the Government in due course, and we look forward to playing our part in scrutinising the work of Skills England.

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

3.51 pm

Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from “That” to the end of the Question and add:

“this House declines to give a Second Reading to the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (Transfer of Functions etc) Bill because, while acknowledging the importance of reforming the delivery of skills and technical education, it fails to establish Skills England as a statutory independent body; because it centralises decision-making power in the hands of the Secretary of State; because it provides for the abolition of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education without ensuring a legally defined replacement; and because it lacks provisions to ensure that Skills England is directly accountable to Parliament.”

The Government are right that our skills system needs reform. The Liberal Democrats agree with the Secretary of State that our current fragmented and confusing skills landscape lets down learners, frustrates businesses and holds back growth, as she made clear in her foreword to Skills England’s first report in the autumn.

I and my hon. Friends on the Liberal Democrat Benches share the ambition to build a high-skill, high-productivity workforce that can meet our economy’s needs, and reform is essential for that ambition to be realised. Like many in the sector, we were encouraged to hear the Government prioritising that last July in the King’s Speech, with the statement:

“My Government will establish Skills England which will have a new partnership with employers at its heart”,

but the Bill before us does not establish Skills England at all; it simply abolishes the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education and transfers the functions directly to the Secretary of State. We need a strong, independent skills body with proper parliamentary oversight and genuine employer engagement, but this Bill delivers a centralisation of power in the hands of Ministers.

There are examples of bodies that combine independence and strong democratic accountability for the most critical policy areas. The Office for Budget Responsibility has statutory independence while being directly accountable to Parliament through the Treasury Committee. Its leadership is subject to parliamentary approval, its reports must be laid before Parliament and it has clear statutory duties to ensure transparency. The Climate Change Committee similarly has a clear statutory basis that ensures it can provide independent advice while being properly scrutinised by Parliament, yet the framework proposed for Skills England—or at least the draft framework for illustrative purposes, which is all that we have seen so far—falls far short of those models. Despite promises about working across Government, its governance

structure is heavily Department for Education-centric. There are no formal mechanisms for co-ordination with other key Departments; there is no cross-departmental board representation; and there is no clear structure for aligning with bodies such as the Migration Advisory Committee, just aspiration. Are we to assume that the Government think that skills policy is not so critical to their mission that it warrants a stronger framework than the one we have seen?

This matters profoundly when we consider the scale of cross-Government co-ordination required. Skills England must work with the Industrial Strategy Advisory Council on future workforce needs; with the Migration Advisory Committee on reducing reliance on overseas workers; with the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero on green skills; with the Department for Work and Pensions on employment programmes; with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology on priority sectors; and with the Department of Health and Social Care on workforce planning. Particularly in light of recent developments, Skills England must also support the Government's strategy for defence and the critical industries and skills that we will need for our defence. As proposed, though, it will lack even director general status, meaning that it will struggle to drive the co-ordination of skills that the system so desperately needs.

Sir John Hayes: The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful case for the independence of Skills England. He will know that Government Departments resist independence like most people resist disease, but his point is important because to get the kind of lateral action he describes in respect of the nuclear industry or other industries, it will be necessary for the body created to have a reach that Government Departments do not tend to have.

Ian Sollom: I agree. That cross-departmental and cross-industry working is a critical reason for the need for a truly independent body.

The implication for standards development is also concerning. Where we have had employer-led trailblazer groups setting standards, the Secretary of State can now bypass employers entirely. In limited circumstances and for minor changes, that will have the benefit of speeding up the review process, which has been frustrating for employers. There are, however, no safeguards to prevent ministerial control becoming the default approach. Instead of giving businesses a structural role, maximising responsiveness, the Bill makes engagement merely consultative. That speaks to a broader point: Skills England's credibility with employers will be key if those employers are to buy into the Government's skills vision for the country. Has the Secretary of State not at least considered the possibility that the proposed structure, whereby programmes can be driven at her whim or those of her successors, undermines that much-needed credibility from the start?

The Government's own impact assessment worries that there will be a

"slowdown in the growth rate of new apprenticeships and technical education courses due to potential delays in the approvals process" caused by this new approach, and it reveals who will pay the price. It is adult learners, who make up 48% of apprentices and often face the greatest barriers to retraining; learners from our most deprived communities, whose

achievement rates are already eight percentage points lower than those from affluent areas; and learners in regions such as the north-east, where apprenticeship starts are already lower and where every reduction in opportunity has a disproportionate effect.

Mr Perkins: I see that the hon. Gentleman has received the briefing from the Association of Employment and Learning Providers. He appears to be reading it virtually word for word; I do not know whether he contributed anything to the speech, but it has been very interesting to hear what he has said.

With the Bill having been through the House of Lords, the hon. Gentleman is proposing a wrecking amendment that would kill it. Although I sympathise with some of the points in his amendment, does he not think that with the reassurances that we have heard from the Secretary of State—which can be scrutinised over the course of this Bill's progress—we can at least get Skills England set up at speed, so that it can take on the shape he is suggesting in future? The hon. Gentleman's proposed approach would cancel all this reform. It would go right back to square one and stop reform dead in its tracks.

Ian Sollom: I have looked beyond the AELP briefing, thank you very much. This is a critical area of Government policy, and it is important to get it right from the start. That is just a difference of approach.

As my noble Friend Baroness Garden said in the other place, this looks like an innocuous little Bill, but there is so much more to it than meets the eye. It represents a fundamental shift away from employer leadership in our skills system towards ministerial whim, a shift away from statutory independence towards departmental convenience, and a shift away from proper parliamentary accountability towards rule by regulation. The Government may argue that this is just an enabling Bill to pave the way for Skills England, but that is precisely the problem. It enables the wrong thing—it enables centralisation when we need independence, it enables ministerial control when we need employer leadership, and it enables opacity when we need accountability.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): The hon. Member and I share a county, and he will be aware that in a place such as mine, we have seen the decimation of level 2 and 3 apprenticeships. Does he not recognise that the biggest concern I hear from employers is that the current system is centralised and letting down working-class families in seats like mine? What they want is Skills England. No employer has been to see me to speak against Skills England, but many have been to speak to me against the current system, because it does not give us flexibility. What might be all right for academic policy in Cambridge will not be all right in Peterborough. We need the change delivered now.

Ian Sollom: I point out that I represent St Neots, which is not Cambridge, and many employers have spoken to me about their concerns about Skills England and the lack of clarity on its future.

We cannot support this Bill. That is not because we oppose reform—we desperately need it—but because centralising power in the hands of Ministers, removing proper scrutiny and weakening employer involvement

[*Ian Sollom*]

in our skills system will make things worse, ultimately. Learners, employers and our economy deserve better than this overcentralisation of power.

Gareth Snell: Will the hon. Member give way?

Ian Sollom: I am going to finish now.

Learners and employers deserve a properly independent Skills England with the authority and accountability to drive real change. I urge the Government to think again and bring forward legislation that delivers the genuine reform that our skills system needs.

4.2 pm

Lee Barron (Corby and East Northamptonshire) (Lab): I speak today in support of this much-needed Bill, and I ask Members to do the same. This Bill is not just a piece of legislation, but the foundation for an English skills revolution. It will give our workforce the right tools to boost our economy, fix the skills shortages and provide real opportunities for millions across the country.

I started off as an apprentice when I left school at 16. The academic school did not work for me as far as my education was concerned, but the apprenticeship gave me opportunities that I could not have otherwise reached. It got me into the world of work. It got me active and away from a desk, and it led me on to a path that, frankly, the classroom could not provide. For too long—this has already been said today—vocational qualifications have been looked down on and seen as second-rate, but they allow people to reach their full potential in a way that fits in with them.

This Bill is a crucial step in delivering the Government's manifesto promise to set up Skills England, which will take a smart, joined-up approach to ensuring our workforce has the skills our economy needs. By bringing businesses, training providers, unions and local leaders together under one roof, we can finally build a system that works for everybody. Skills England will map out where we are falling short, make sure training fits with what businesses actually need, and oversee the new growth and skills levy, which will replace the existing apprenticeship levy. This means that businesses can put money into the right training at the right time, leaving both workers and employers with more.

Let us be honest: we are in a skills crisis. In construction, health and social care, engineering and digital industries, we simply do not have enough trained workers, which is why we have to move so speedily. According to the 2022 employer skills survey, more than a third of job vacancies are a result of people not having the right skills—the skills that we need—and that is not acceptable. We cannot allow a lack of training to hold our economy back, which is exactly what is happening at the moment. The Bill will ensure that apprenticeships, T-levels and technical qualifications match what employers need. Whether those involved are young people starting out or adults reskilling, they will know that they are on the path to a stable, well-paid job.

We must not ignore the damage done by those who look down on vocational training. We need to change the way in which we talk about skills, apprenticeships and lifelong learning, because those careers are not a back-up plan but a first-class route to success. The Bill represents a move to challenge the idea that the only

way to get ahead is through university. It shows that we are serious about supporting technical skills so that no matter what path people choose, they have what they need to thrive in life and in work. I say to Members, “Ask yourselves this: do you want a skills system that actually works? Do you want to help build a workforce that is properly trained, valued and paid?” This Bill is our chance to fix skills training in England. It will give apprenticeships and technical education the attention, funding, and respect that they deserve. It will bring order, clarity and proper co-ordination, elements that our system has been lacking for too long.

In September I visited Corby technical school in my constituency, which is led by Shona Lomas. I was told about its approved partners scheme, a leading scheme in the area, which brings in business partners who support children through school, offer work experience and provide apprenticeships. When that school opened, it was looked down upon. It was talked down. People talked as though the kids who were not bright enough went to that school. That is wrong, because the kids who go to that school are well supported, getting on with partnerships and getting on in life through apprenticeships. The CTS scheme has now grown to 119 partners, including local schools, colleges and major local employers, and it has seen a rise in awareness and interest since the recent National Apprenticeship Week. Opportunities such as those give young people the skills and confidence that they need to get on in life.

We have more brilliant apprenticeships schemes throughout my constituency—some of which I visited recently—including those at 7formation, Asda, Carmack Engineering, Weetabix and RS Components, which was ranked 82nd in last year's list of the top apprenticeship employers in the country. Those businesses are delivering what they can, but the Bill gives them the freedom and flexibility to deliver more. Most important, it provides the links that will enable us to build the future and the growth that our economy needs. These are the kinds of opportunities that we can grow and spread through Skills England and the powers in the Bill. Let us get our system in step with an industrial strategy, joined with local economies, to bring the skills revolution that our country so desperately needs. We can do that with the Bill.

4.8 pm

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): This Bill is important for the future of technical education and apprenticeships in our country, and I accept that the Government's intention is to streamline the governance and management of skills. However, I believe that, in its current form, the Bill threatens to centralise the system to such an extent that it may undermine the independence and effectiveness of our skills system.

The Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education was established with the clear purpose of ensuring that apprenticeship standards and assessments were determined with the input of employers, education providers and industry experts. I fear that by abolishing this body in favour of a group of civil servants appointed by the Secretary of State, the Government will make technical education less responsive to the needs of the labour market. The Bill removes the requirement to publish regular reviews of occupational standards and apprenticeship assessment plans. The Government say

that removing this duty allows for much greater flexibility, but they are doing so without ensuring that the views of employers, educators and other relevant bodies will continue to be heard and considered.

The Bill grants the Secretary of State power to determine the standards and assessments that will be used to measure progress in technical education. No longer will these decisions be made by a broad group of stakeholders, including employers and sector specialists. What does all this mean for our workforce, and what does it mean for learners? It means that we are at risk of creating a system that is more distant, less responsive and potentially less effective. When decisions are made by civil servants without the input of those on the ground—those directly impacted by these decisions—we risk losing touch with the realities of the skills landscape.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): I am afraid the hon. Member and the shadow Secretary of State speak as if the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education was an unblemished success. Between 2018-19 and 2023-24, apprenticeship starts in England per capita dropped by 16%, so how is it a responsive system? I think the House would be better served if Opposition Members acknowledged that. I understand why he is focused on structures, because that is in part what the Bill focuses on, but surely we should also be focused on outcomes, on which the previous Government were not delivering.

Sir Ashley Fox: The pandemic clearly had something to do with that reduction. I would not say the system is perfect, but I fear that replacing it with a committee of civil servants appointed by the Secretary of State is likely to be less successful still.

Amendments have been made in the other place to address some of these concerns. Specifically, a one-year delay was added between the establishment of Skills England and the commencement of the Bill, which would allow for a more effective transition and give Skills England a better chance of getting up and running. It is crucial that we do not damage the very real progress that was made on technical education under the last Government. During the general election, my party pledged to raise the number of people in high-skilled apprenticeships by 100,000 per year, representing a 30% rise. This was to recognise that, for many young people, apprenticeships represent a better way to enter the workplace than some university degrees.

Bridgwater and Taunton College, based in my constituency, is the UK's largest provider of apprenticeships, supporting thousands of learners in achieving their career ambitions. With over 120 apprenticeship programmes, the college offers exceptional opportunities for individuals to gain hands-on experience and develop the skills needed for today's competitive job market. BTC's success is reflected in its recent achievements, such as its registered nurse degree apprenticeship, which recruited 53 apprentices in the 2023-24 academic year alone. The college's commitment to employer engagement and industry-aligned training is at the heart of its success. It has strong partnerships with employers of all sizes, ensuring that its apprenticeship programmes meet local and national skill needs.

While BTC welcomes the streamlining of the management of apprenticeships, it is clear that these changes must not reduce the quality of education and

support provided to apprentices. As it rightly points out, it is crucial that these changes do not compromise the wellbeing of students or the high standards of education they have come to expect. I hope that the new framework will continue to uphold these standards and ensure that the needs of both students and employers are met effectively. It is this type of local, industry-focused and employer-engaged approach to skills training that we should be fostering.

In conclusion, while I understand the desire to create a streamlined, more efficient system, the Government must be careful not to sacrifice the effectiveness and independence that have been the hallmark of our apprenticeship and technical education system. This Bill, in its current form, grants perhaps too much power to the Secretary of State with too little accountability. It risks diminishing the role of employers and learners, and weakening the checks and balances that have served us well, so I will continue to scrutinise this Bill as it proceeds through Parliament.

4.14 pm

Gurinder Singh Josan (Smethwick) (Lab): I am pleased to speak on Second Reading of this Bill, which I welcome for its focus on overhauling the skills system in England, particularly in relation to apprenticeships and technical education.

The creation of the Institute for Apprenticeships in 2017, with the subsequent addition of oversight for technical education, undoubtedly helped to create a system that increasingly includes higher-quality apprenticeships and increases the accessibility of these pathways to all. However, there are still too many in our country for whom unlocking their full potential remains a distant dream, which is fundamental to everything this Government have set out to achieve and to the future of our country.

The missions driving this Government—the incredible plan for change, the drive to become self-sufficient as a nation on energy, defence and security, the need to increase growth in our economy, and the drive to improve the lives of all our citizens—all require a comprehensive plan for improving skills. The basic provisions of the Bill will abolish the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education and transfer its functions ultimately to Skills England; there are also proposed changes to the functions undertaken by Skills England. I believe these changes are important and will help to ensure a more simplified system with built-in flexibility, which will enable the skills system to take account of changing circumstances.

Conservative Members have spoken about the powers being taken up by the Secretary of State and the Department. I think building in accountability is important, so that we know that this Parliament can come back to Ministers and hold them to account on that. All this, I think, will help to ensure that our skills system is truly responsive to the needs of users, employers and our economy.

This matter is incredibly important to my constituents. Smethwick has a rich industrial heritage, and, while there have been significant changes over the years, the need for high-quality skills, education and training remains key. In Smethwick, significantly more people than the national average have no qualifications, significantly fewer have a level 4 qualification, and fewer than the

[Gurinder Singh Josan]

national average take part in apprenticeships. Too often, structural inconsistencies hold back our businesses and our people from flourishing. The lack of skills essential for work, the lack of specific skills required by employers in the place they are needed and the lack of options available to many for achieving these skills are just some of those issues. The Bill will help to streamline the skills system and ensure it is able to identify gaps, respond to changing circumstances and provide the skills needed for our businesses to flourish.

Last week, I met Robert Powell, the head of resource development at Keltruck Limited, which is the largest independently owned Scania distributor globally involved in the sale of new and used trucks, and is based in my constituency. Keltruck is a significant business, with 461 employees, including 51 apprentices—that is more than 10% of its employees. I was also informed that pretty much all the senior staff in the organisation have come up through the apprenticeship route—this is a business that really values apprenticeships. Many of its apprentices go on to great jobs in industry, for example, one went on to become chief mechanic at a top Formula 1 racing team. That is something to aspire to, and a story for somebody from Smethwick that is quite inspirational.

Being more responsive means listening to businesses. While Keltruck welcomes the recent announcement that English and maths qualifications will not be a requirement for apprenticeships, it is concerned that this requirement still applies to 16 to 18-year-olds beginning an apprenticeship. The story that was told to me was that some of their senior staff would not be in that position if they were required to have an English or maths qualification at age 16 or 18. I hope the Government can therefore look at that too to ensure that all our young people have access to the best quality apprenticeships.

In an illustration of the flexibility and freedom that can be brought to bear, I congratulate Richard Parker, the Mayor of the West Midlands, and the West Midlands combined authority on launching a scheme last year to enable bigger businesses with an unspent apprenticeship levy to donate that to the West Midlands combined authority rather than returning it to His Majesty's Revenue and Customs. That has allowed the West Midlands combined authority to receive nearly £3 million to support 176 small and medium-sized enterprises and 411 apprentices through fully funded apprenticeships. That is an indication of how the freedoms brought about by the Bill could be utilised.

The two examples I have outlined show what can be achieved through a skills system that is more flexible and responsive, as well as being focused on excellence. That is incredibly important to my constituency and I therefore have no hesitation in supporting the Bill.

4.21 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): We cannot just wish it into being, we cannot assume it or assert it, and we cannot legislate for it: esteem is in the eye of the esteeper and parity of esteem is earned. In technical and vocational education and training, that requires a clear and understandable set of qualifications with high standards and specifications that people know cannot be fiddled because they have been set independently. It

also requires equipping the individual with what they need to know and what they need to be able to do to succeed in a trade, craft or sector because those standards have been set by employers in that trade, craft or sector.

Those things were at the heart of the blueprint set out for technical and vocational education in this country, which has been followed for the last number of years. I say the blueprint, but it was also a red print, because it was the vision of Lord Sainsbury, a Labour peer. In his landmark report, he set out that we needed to reform the system so that we had a streamlined set of qualifications with clear paths to vocations. His recommendations included: a minimum length of time for apprenticeships, along with a minimum length of time off the job; for T-levels, a minimum length, which was much longer than usual for industrial placements; and standards set by employers. There was also the expansion of the remit of what was then the Institute for Apprenticeships to become the broader Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, linking apprenticeships and T-levels. Lord Sainsbury was also absolutely clear that specifying standards was not a job for Ministers in the Department for Education. It was a job for employers in the industries that would employ those apprentices.

We thought that those principles had become a matter of cross-party consensus. I am sorry to say that we were wrong. We have already had from this new Government a rowing back on the streamlining of qualifications. They have said that they will have shorter apprenticeships but still call them apprenticeships. Now, in the Bill, they will abolish—not reform or evolve—the body that is independent of Government, which sets the standards and ensures the integrity of the system.

Over 50 years in this country, we have had industrial training boards, the Manpower Services Commission, the Training Commission, training and enterprise councils—TECs—which were different from another TEC, the Technician Education Council, which existed alongside the Business Education Council, or BEC. BEC and TEC would eventually get together to give us the Business and Technology Education Council, or BTEC. There were national training organisations, the Learning and Skills Council, sector skills councils, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills and the Skills Funding Agency, or SFA, which would later become the Education and Skills Funding Agency, or ESFA. Lately, we have had local skills improvement plans and IfATE.

Now we will have Skills England, which will be the 13th skills agency in 50 years. I say to Ministers that if all it takes to solve our skills challenges is a new body, a machinery of Government change, do they not think that one of the previous 12 would have managed that already? Ministers, especially those in new Governments, like to create something new, and, in this case, they think that they have something new that business wants, which is a quango—except Skills England is not even a quango. I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for indulging me thus far in talking about all these things, because none of them is in the Bill. This Bill is not about Skills England. There are, I think, two mentions of Skills England in the text of the Bill and I think that they were both inserted by the House of Lords.

This Bill is about abolishing the independent institute that sets standards and passing those powers not to Skills England but to the Secretary of State. That is

what Skills England is. Ministers are bandying about all these fancy terms about agency this, and agency that, but it is part of the Department for Education. When it comes to working across Government, I have no reason to believe that this new part of the DFE will be any more equipped to work across Government, let alone across the whole economy, in solving some of these issues.

I love the Department for Education deeply, but, honestly, to operate across Government, to exert leverage and to get things done, I am afraid that the new body has to be in the Treasury or possibly in the Cabinet Office—not in the Education Department, the Business and Trade Department, or some of the others that could have been picked. Therefore, far from reflecting what business needs, what this legislation does is remove the requirement for business to set the standards for what their future employees will learn.

Following the vote in the House of Lords, the Government say that they will amend the Bill to be clear that they will still listen to business. I have the amendment here. What it says is that they will be clear about the times when they will listen to business and when they will not, which is not quite the same thing. In any case, if we are to make use of that business voice—if it is really going to mean something—it has to go hand in hand with the independence of the body. As things stand, even if the DFE is listening to business, it will still be the convenor. There will be no other body. Therefore, it will be the Government who are setting the standards for T-levels and for apprenticeships. I have asked the Minister this question twice already. We would not allow the Department for Education to set the standards for A-levels. We would always have that independently done and verified. Therefore if we would not let it happen for A-levels, how can it be right for T-levels? That is a rhetorical question, but it is a rhetorical question that Ministers should try to answer.

Baroness Smith of Malvern set out all the things that were being done to make Skills England something other than just another unit—a mini department—within the DFE. Today, the Secretary of State has set out some of her appointments, which sound like good appointments, to that body. But none of that is in legislation. That was all news to us. News of this set-up and the appointments of these individuals has come out since the announcement of Skills England. We are voting over the course of the next few weeks, as the Bill passes through its stages, on what will be an Act of Parliament. All that Act of Parliament will say is that those powers are coming to the office of the Secretary of State for Education, and it will be for them to decide in the future how to use them. It may well be that this team of Ministers is in power for 25 to 30 years, or it may not. I encourage all colleagues to think about that. When we legislate, we do so not just for the next 12 months, or even for the next four or five years; we legislate the law of the land, which, all other things being equal, stays in place.

I have some good news. I confidently predict that the Government will hit all their targets on the numbers of young people going through technical vocational education and training and attaining. That is because I think back to the 2000s, and the key target of more children getting five or more GCSEs at grade C or above, including in English and maths. Year after year they made that happen, even though, as we knew subsequently, we were tumbling down the international comparison tables.

About a dozen different ruses made those figures look better every year, and that was achieved even without having final control over the specification and what counted as passing or getting a particular grade. Let us imagine what the Government could achieve now.

The Government want a new body—fine. But to give it a chance to succeed for our economy and, crucially, for the young people who this ultimately is about, that body must be independent. I call on Ministers to take the opportunity, as this legislation goes through the House, to write that on the face of the Bill. We were encouraged by the Secretary of State saying earlier that, in any case, within two years they will review the status of Skills England with a view to perhaps making it a statutorily independent body. I encourage Ministers to take the opportunity in Committee to write that into the legislation.

4.31 pm

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): I welcome the Bill's commitment to broadening educational opportunities and skills training, which is so urgently needed. As one of those young people who undertook my qualifications in the early 2000s, I assure the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) that they were rigorous and got me where I am today.

Areas such as South East Cornwall have felt forgotten and left behind, cut off from the opportunities of economic growth in other parts of the UK. Labour understands the link between an individual's education and training and the wider economic prosperity of our country. The Bill is an example of how we are rebuilding the country from the ground up, focusing on our young people. Where university or academic routes are not the right fit, apprenticeships offer vital, valuable alternatives not only for those enrolled, but for training providers, local businesses and the economy.

Where someone is born and the circumstances in which they grow up should not limit where they go or what they achieve. This mission-driven Labour Government are making education a priority. It is a far cry from the previous Government, which saw apprenticeships collapsing, businesses pleading for change and our young people paying the price. In South East Cornwall, local businesses lead by example. Wildanet, a home-grown company from Liskeard, is doing fantastic work to improve digital connectivity across Cornwall. It is investing in more than just cables and infrastructure. It is investing in our local people through training schemes that create meaningful opportunities for local residents and build the skills that directly benefit my community.

During National Apprenticeship Week last week, I had the privilege of attending Wildanet's apprenticeship graduation ceremony. Celebrating the achievements of our young people was a reminder of what is possible when we support them through businesses such as Wildanet and through the Bill. Working in partnership with Truro and Penwith College, Wildanet's ground-breaking apprenticeship scheme is a key part of the company's DNA, creating new jobs and training people locally. It is vital that such opportunities in rural communities continue to build momentum, and that is what the Bill will deliver.

The Bill is a step in the right direction. I want to highlight the brilliant work of Truro and Penwith College, Cornwall's only expert apprenticeship provider and one

[*Anna Gelderd*]

of just five further education colleges in the UK that have been awarded this status by the Department for Education. The college's staff, many of whom are resident in South East Cornwall, play a crucial role in shaping our local workforce and improving opportunities. Apprenticeship courses aligned with the Government's mission and key industries will help people secure reliable, high-quality employment after completing their training.

In Cornwall, where incomes remain about 20% below the national average, this investment in skills and future-proofed jobs is essential. By strengthening our apprenticeships system, we can equip the next generation while also supporting local businesses such as Wildanet.

Cornwall was a driving force in Britain's first industrial revolution. With the right foundations, we can once again lead the industries of the future, whether in renewable energy, marine technology or digital infrastructure. The first step is building those foundations.

4.35 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): Much of this debate has been about the purpose of learning—the Secretary of State began in that spirit—and I think we can all agree that the purpose of learning is both to deliver personal fulfilment, through the acquisition of understanding and competencies, and to fulfil a social purpose by providing for economic needs. John Ruskin said:

“The first condition of education is being able to put someone to wholesome and meaningful work.”

Apprenticeships embody—indeed, they epitomise—that purpose. A trainee learns from a mentor a skill that has use in a workplace.

The value of apprenticeships is why, when I was shadow Minister for universities, further education and skills, and subsequently the Minister in 2010, I set about revitalising the apprenticeships system. I knew that apprenticeships were well understood by employers, were widely recognised by the public and could be attractive to trainees.

I will make a point on adult learning, provoked by the excellent contribution by the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom). It is vitally important to understand that in order to skill our workforce and provide it with the necessary competencies to meet the Government's economic ambitions, we really do have to reskill existing workers as well as making practical and vocational education attractive to new entrants to the workplace. Simply as a matter of numbers, if we train more young people but do not retrain the existing workforce, we will never deliver the capacity needed to fill the skills gaps and deal with the skills shortages that, as has been said repeatedly, inhibit our ability to drive the economy forward.

The Bill is about the management and maintenance of standards of apprenticeships. I understood why that mattered so much, which is why I set about elevating the practical, the vocational and the technical. I believe that practical, vocational and technical learning is as important as academic accomplishment. It has been a myth perpetuated by the establishment—I am inclined to say “the liberal establishment,” but I do not want to damn the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire,

having praised him so nicely—that the only form of prowess that counts comes through academic learning. That myth has been so pervasive that a former Prime Minister, Tony Blair, set out the extraordinary, bizarre ambition that 50% of people should go to university.

The number of people who go to university should be about their tastes, talents, aptitudes and abilities. We should not set a target and then shoehorn people into a system in order to meet it; we should allow a system to reflect those aptitudes, tastes and talents. Many people's abilities rightly lead them not to an academic education but to a practical one, yet we have underpowered and undervalued practical learning for so long in this country, and we continue to do so.

Deep at the heart of that fault has been the careers service. As hon. Members have mentioned, the careers advice and guidance that people have got has guided them—even when it did not suit them—into an academic route that has ill-served them. Even though it has landed them with immense debts, it has rendered them unable to get the job that would allow them to pay off those debts readily. So it is really important that we look again at that advice and guidance.

As I have mentioned, when I was the Minister I created a statutory duty on schools to offer independent advice and guidance, but I should have insisted that it was to be given face to face, with a careers adviser visiting a careers fair or holding personal interviews with students to set out the various options available. Unfortunately, teachers, who have typically been to university themselves, know that route well, and they are inclined to say to young people, “Why don't you do what I did, and follow the route that I took?” They are often less well informed about the practical and vocational routes that would lead people to acquire the kinds of skills that, as we have all said, are vitally important.

I should, at the outset of my remarks, have referred Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, because I am associated with universities. Indeed, I ought also to say that my background is entirely academic. I studied at two universities, Nottingham and Cambridge, and I have taught in two as well, so I do not really have any practical skills myself, unlike my dear father, who could turn his hand to almost anything—there was nothing he could not do, practically. I have to send out for a man in the village if I want anything done. So my case is not born of any personal prejudice. Indeed, maybe it is born of a certain envy of those that can make and do things in the way that Ruskin described.

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir John Hayes: I will happily give way. The hon. Lady is now going to test me on my practical incompetence.

Mrs Brackenridge: I have a couple of points to make. Does the right hon. Member acknowledge the important role that universities play in supporting technical advanced education? Does he also agree that, under the stewardship of the last Government, we saw a decimation of specialist careers guidance in schools?

Sir John Hayes: Yes, of course I acknowledge that role. It is important to point out that many of the universities do great work. I would not want to disparage that work, and the hon. Lady is right to draw the House's attention to it.

The point I was really making is that, sadly, many people are driven down a pathway that is just not right for them. That is because of the underestimation of the significance of practical accomplishment, both at an intellectual level—the unwillingness to recognise that practical accomplishment is of a high order—and at a practical level in terms of the advice that people are often given and may later regret. It is not easy for a young person to know quite what path to take, and if the advice they get skews them towards one route or another, it is fairly likely that they will be ill equipped to make a considered judgment. I am simply making the argument for, at the very least, a degree of equality about the advice we give to people.

This Bill is questionable in a number of respects, and in particular, as has been highlighted by my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) and others, in the way that it presents the future management and control of apprenticeships and the standards associated with them. It is right that employers play a key role in that process, but the Bill is silent on the role of employers.

I am not an unbridled admirer of the Institute for Apprenticeships. I did not create it. In my time as Minister, and indeed as shadow Minister, the standards were guaranteed by sector skills councils. I would have gone for a sector-based approach myself. Had I stayed in office, I would probably have developed that further and emulated the German approach by establishing guilds. I began to lay some of the foundations for that as Minister, and I would have gone for such an approach rather than where we ended up. Having said that, what is critical about either that kind of sectoral approach or the apprenticeship institute being abolished by the Bill is the role of employers in ensuring that what is taught and tested meets a real economic need. We cannot detach that economic need from the structure by which we guarantee the quality of apprenticeships.

So, there is the issue of quality, and again the Bill is unconvincing in that respect. My right hon. Friend drew attention to the fact that if quality is lowered, the numbers can be increased. Indeed, the Labour Government prior to 2010 introduced programme-led apprenticeships, which were taught entirely outside of the workplace. They were still called apprenticeships but were unrelated to any particular employer or sector. That is not the way forward, and any diminution of standards will further undermine the status of practical learning. I simply say to the Minister that if the Secretary of State is going to take back control—to borrow a popular phrase—it is vital that simultaneously we hear more during the passage of the legislation about how standards will be maintained, because at the moment we have few assurances to that effect.

I will say a word on numbers, partly to advertise my own effectiveness in government. When I became the Minister of State for Further Education, Skills and Lifelong Learning, I was able, due to the promotion of apprenticeships, to drive their number to the highest level in modern times. I became the Minister in 2010. By 2011/12, we achieved 521,000 apprenticeships. That has never been equalled since, and we are now down to about 340,000. To say a word about previous Labour Governments, I inherited 280,000 apprenticeships, and the average number of apprenticeship completions from 2000 to 2009-10 was less than 100,000 a year.

As we debate these matters going forward, it is vital that the Government commit to the apprenticeship as a key determiner of their skills policy. The number of apprenticeships and their quality will allow the Government to drive up skills levels and, therefore, to meet economic need.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir John Hayes: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who has been listening attentively to my speech so far.

Andrew Pakes: I am worried that I might damn the right hon. Gentleman with faint praise because when he cited the numbers from when he was the Minister, one of the determinants of his success was the involvement of trade unions in the sector skills council and the partnership. While we have talked lots about employers, he was an advocate in his party of involving trade unions. Unfortunately, Ministers after him excluded trade unions from that involvement. Is he advocating that trade unions should be involved in the new system?

Sir John Hayes: I am immensely flattered that the hon. Gentleman has followed my career with such assiduity. He is right: I defended Unionlearn and would continue to do so. Trade unions can play a vital part in ensuring the outcomes that the Government say that they seek and that I certainly believe in. Indeed, I went on a delegation to Germany—this is a minor digression, Madam Deputy Speaker—to look at their apprenticeship system with employers and trade unions, because I know that the combination of trade unions and employers was critical to driving the skills agenda. Again, it would be useful to hear from the Government what they think about that. How will they engage with the trade unions? Because trade unions are not mentioned in the Bill at all, we are left to wonder what will happen, as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire said in his excellent speech, when the Secretary of State seizes control of apprenticeships from the current structure.

There are a number of other questions to be put. The hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins) made a very good point about SMEs. One challenge when I was a Minister, and for subsequent Ministers and this Government, was in engaging more SMEs. I am not sure that we were successful in that. I launched a review of how we might do that; it was typically by making the system regulatory and trying to review some of the paperwork. Again, as the Bill moves forward, what more will we hear about how to engage more SMEs? If we say to someone in my constituency that there are really good engineering apprenticeships in Derby, which I am told is in the same part of the country—or in the same region at least, whatever that means—we might as well be saying that there are apprenticeships on Mars, because they will not be able to get to Derby to study. We really need the spread of apprenticeship accessibility, which SME involvement provides. It is the only way of creating the reach that is necessary to engage more young people and adult learners in acquiring those skills.

I have one or two further questions, with which I hope the Minister can deal. I have already spoken about employers. On the status of the new body, is it the Government's intention, as the Secretary of State implied—

[Sir John Hayes]

but no more than that—for it to become a non-departmental body in the end, or will it always be an in-house body? Anyone who has been close to government will know the significance of those two options. It needs at the very least to be a non-departmental body if it is to have the necessary freedom and independence to respond to employer need and changing economic circumstances. The Secretary of State hinted that that might be the direction of travel, but we do need to know more when the Minister sums up.

Luke Murphy: Conservative Members are making quite the noise about IfATE's independence, but I remind the House that this is a precedented move. The Conservative Government established the Standards and Testing Agency, which is currently the Executive agency and was formerly a non-departmental body. That is exactly the same status as IfATE, which performed very similar functions for many other kinds of qualifications and tests. Why was it okay for the right hon. Gentleman's Government to do that in 2011? It seems that the Conservatives are more focused on the process point—a process similar to that undertaken by their Government—and not on the outcomes that will deliver for working-class kids interested in learning a trade.

Sir John Hayes: As I say, I am not an unbridled advocate of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education, which the Bill abolishes. I did not set it up during my stewardship. As I have already described, I would have preferred a different, guild-based model. Guilds would, by their nature, have been independent from Government. If we look at the German model, the guilds are sovereign, and they are closely tied, by the way, to the trade unions of the particular sectors for which they are responsible. I am simply saying to the Government, "Here is the chance to do something better." One learns from experience and one learns from government experience, to be honest and straightforward about that.

Certainly, there is the issue of standards. How will standards be determined and delivered? Will that be done by an independent body or a series of independent bodies, perhaps in different parts of the business community, or will it be done directly by the Department? What about the figures in the impact assessment, which says that there would be a reduction in the number of apprenticeships? We are already at a pretty pitifully low level. As I described earlier, the number of apprenticeship starts in 2023-34 stood at 340,000. We can do much better than that, but the Government have certainly suggested in their impact assessment that they expect that number to fall, at least in the interim. By how much do we expect it to fall—5%, 10%, or 25%? We really need to know a little more about that.

The Secretary of State spoke about, as the Labour manifesto detailed, work with the Migration Advisory Committee and others. Can we hear a little more about the detail of that? Certainly, it will be required before we vote on Third Reading, because it is inconceivable that the Government would not want to be more straightforward about how those structural links will work and what role those other bodies will play in helping the Government to deliver their objectives.

Practical accomplishment is something dear to my heart. William Morris—rarely quoted in this House except by me, which is a sad indictment of the modern Labour party—said:

"a man at work, making something which he feels will exist because he is working at it and wills it, is exercising the energies of his mind and soul as well as of his body."

Morris understood what I know many, from their contributions to this debate, understand too: that it is time to again elevate the practical. This is, of course, about our ambitions for the economy, but it is also about the people who acquire those skills—the way their lives are changed because their life chances are changed.

I started by speaking about John Ruskin and his view of these things. Ruskin said:

"The highest reward for a person's toil is not what they get for it, but what they become by it."

Yes, this is about the economy, but it is also about the difference we make to individuals who, through gaining new skills, grow and develop and become proud of what they can do for themselves, their family, their community and their nation.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I had not been planning to introduce a formal time limit, but Members might reflect on how many are still standing and perhaps restrain themselves to five minutes or so.

4.56 pm

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): In rising to support the Bill, I want to say, without heaping too much praise on the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), that it is a pleasure to follow him and many of the comments he made. Like him, I have arrived at this place through the academic route, and perhaps precisely because of that, I, like him, am incredibly aware of the value of the vocational, practical and apprenticeship route. It is in that value that the power of what the Bill is seeking to achieve lies, and I hope to return to that point. I thank the Secretary of State, who is no longer in her place, for bringing forward the Bill, because seven months ago this country voted for change, and what we see today is another building block of that very necessary change.

On a recent visit to Southampton college's marine skills centre in my constituency for National Apprenticeship Week last week, when it seems we were all busy making visits, I met some apprentices learning a whole range of skills, from engineering to electronics, to carpentry and yacht making. It was truly impressive, mostly because I would be entirely useless at all those skills. It reminded me that investing in apprenticeships is one of the most effective ways that we can equip the next generation with the skills they need. I am pleased to see that, with this Bill, the Government are taking action to ensure we get the right framework in place to shape our apprenticeship system. What apprentices want and what employers need is a system that offers routes into those meaningful, secure jobs, full of the dignity of work, that will bring them success as well as grow the economy.

I am not particularly obsessive about the structure of things or the way in which Government Departments organise themselves to implement policy. Like most people, I want what works, and I want what works best. The truth is that what we have at the moment, however

much Opposition Members try to dress it up, is simply not working for too many people. I am pleased that the focus of the Bill is on how we create an agency that will reduce the number of hoops to jump through and will, as my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Luke Murphy) said, focus on outcomes, what happens at the end of these training courses, and opportunities.

Damian Hinds: Which hoops is the hon. Gentleman looking forward to the removal of?

Darren Paffey: I think the best people to answer that would be the employers who, time and again, have been telling us—and, I am pretty sure, telling the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues—about the pure bureaucracy and complexity of the system that has been set up. They are the best advocates of the need for change. By setting up Skills England we can give apprenticeships the flexibility and durability that we need, and that those training will need. Importantly, we can take the interests of employers and young people into account.

If the years since 2010 have taught us anything, it is that poor policy has consequences. Sadly, the IfATE structure set up by the previous Tory Government has failed to deliver and, alongside a lack of investment, that has left the UK with stubbornly high numbers of vacancies due to skills shortages and too many young people who are not in education, employment or training. I would welcome reflections from the Minister on how, at the same time as setting out the new framework and strategy for skills development, we can deal specifically with those not in education, employment or training, and whether a strategy specifically on that would be another jigsaw piece in resolving this picture.

Employers in Southampton Itchen are crying out for new trainees and employees, especially those with crucial, basic digital skills, but even today in this country about 7.5 million working-age adults lack those skills. Is that the golden Tory legacy that we keep being reminded of by Members on the Opposition Benches? All of that is changing with the structures that the Bill sets up, paving the way for Skills England. That will meet the skills challenges of today and empower all training providers and employers, including the excellent Kiwi Education and the South Coast Institute of Technology, to drive maritime, engineering, hospitality and digital opportunities in and around Southampton. It will also ensure that we reset the prestige of apprentices and the apprenticeship route, and elevate them once again to a place of real value.

I associate myself with comments from Members on both sides of the Chamber about the value of apprenticeship skills. I say that as someone who has paid my bills by being a university lecturer for a number of years, yet throughout my time in politics I have championed apprenticeship routes. A piece of paper at the end of something is pretty incidental, to be frank, because its real power is what it empowers someone to do and which doors it opens up. To return to the point made by the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings, it is about what skills enable someone to be, and what they become through those skills. That is where the real value and prestige of apprenticeships lies, and that is why we are resetting the value of them.

If we want growth and a well-trained workforce, the Bill is a route to delivering that. With this Bill, and with action that I know Ministers will be taking in future,

this Labour Government are widening options and breaking down barriers to opportunity for people in Southampton and beyond. That is why I will be proud to walk through the Lobby and vote for the Bill later today.

5.3 pm

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): The Bill is a crucial first step in the reform of the Government's skills system. This Government are changing the narrative around skills. When I was younger, apprenticeships were often seen as something for working-class kids and a route into traditional trades such as plumbing, bricklaying—like my dad—hairdressing or being an electrician. Although those trades remain vital—indeed, our ambitious house building targets rely on them—skills today can be about so much more. They are the foundations of our economy, our technological progress and our ability to compete on the global stage.

The Bill underpins the Government's aim for apprenticeships not to be just for 18-year-olds fresh out of college. In my constituency of Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages, many apprentices are over the age of 25. In fact, the majority of apprenticeships being taken up are advanced qualifications. Those people know what they want to do, may already have years of experience and are looking to upskill, retrain and take their career to the next level. We need exactly that kind of dynamic, lifelong learning.

We cannot just talk about improving skills—we need real, structural reforms to make that happen. That is why the Bill is so important. In October last year, the Government carried out a detailed impact assessment, looking at how it will affect learners, training providers, businesses and staff. The conclusion was clear: the Bill is essential to deliver the manifesto commitment to establish Skills England on which I and many of my hon. Friends stood.

We cannot continue to make the same mistakes made by last Government by keeping the fragmented approach of a slow, inefficient skills system. We do not have time for that. We need a joined-up approach that delivers for people who are trying to build their future, and for employers who are trying to build their business. For that reason, I was concerned about amendment 15 tabled to clause 11 in the other place, which introduced a one-year delay between the establishment of Skills England and the commencement of the Bill. I worry that that will delay the establishment of Skills England, and negatively impact employers, learners and the economy. I hope that the Government can minimise the impact of that amendment in Committee.

Hon. Members will often hear me champion Newcastle and Stafford college, based in my constituency, one of a small number of colleges nationally to twice achieve an Ofsted outstanding rating in all areas, including apprenticeships. It was recently praised for its “strong contribution” to meeting local skills needs, which is incredibly impactful on our local economy. The Bill will only help to increase that impact.

More widely, Skills England will work hand in hand with industry, employees and training providers to ensure we are not just reacting to skills shortages, but proactively identifying them. For too long, we have had a sticking-plaster approach to skills—and, let us be honest, to

[Leigh Ingham]

everything else—but that must change. We need to be strategic, focused and ambitious in developing a workforce who are prepared for the future. The Bill recognises those needs and confirms the manifesto commitment that I proudly stood on. I am delighted to see it progress, so that people in Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages can better access training and, ultimately, better jobs. I urge all colleagues to vote for the Bill.

5.7 pm

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): I and all my hon. Friends were elected last year on a simple promise: change. It was a promise to rebuild our country, economy, health service and infrastructure, and to lay the foundations for a brighter future where we will overcome the challenges of climate change, see the benefits of a green economy and lead the world in new technology. It will be a future of prosperity and opportunity for all. All of that—every mission the Government have set out—depends on a skilled workforce.

I have recently seen the diversity of apprenticeships in my local area, from the National Horseracing College in Rossington, to the SSE business in Keadby, to Jack who cuts my hair, who I am sure hon. Members will agree is supremely talented—a phenomenon. I just ruined his career, I think—sorry, Jack! Everything this Government have promised can be created only by having the right people, with the right skills, in the right place, at the right time.

Whether they are in the NHS, energy, house building or security, apprenticeships have been part of the fabric of British society for hundreds of years. They have made us the country that we are today. In the past, modern apprenticeships were met with great enthusiasm by both leaders and businesses. They represented a different way of learning and had great promise, but in recent years that promise has been unfulfilled. Both apprenticeship starts and, crucially, apprenticeship completions have fallen off dramatically. The current system is not working for learners, employers or our country.

We need a targeted and strategic system that works for everyone. The system must work with local leaders and businesses to be relevant to the skills gaps that are holding our economy back. We need partnership, but most importantly we need a system that inspires and empowers our teens and young people.

Both before and since becoming an MP, I have had the privilege to meet many of the young people in schools in my constituency. Their talent and ambition are outstanding. So many of them are raring to change the world to tackle the climate crisis, harness artificial intelligence and be part of a brighter future. All they need is the opportunity to succeed, and they will make us proud. That is what the Government have promised, and the establishment and progression of Skills England is at the heart of that promise.

Creating Skills England was one of this Government's first acts, and it is already doing important work. This Bill is an important step towards fully empowering Skills England, reshaping the skills landscape and getting our economy growing. This Government's No. 1 priority is growth and to get the economy working again not just in some places and for some people, but everywhere

for everyone—for north and south, urban and rural and all backgrounds and abilities. The fragmented approach we have seen over the last decade has never been so evident in the lack of pipeline for skills that we need right now and in the future.

Skills and apprenticeships must be at the heart of that strategy. Too many industries are held back from their potential because of the skills shortages we see. So many of the challenges that this country faces are rooted in the skills gap. Our housing crisis is built on a huge deficit in skilled construction workers, our hospitals and care homes cannot get the staff they need to do much more than hold together a system on the verge of collapse, and our economic productivity crisis is rooted in far too many people who miss out on the opportunity to fulfil their potential, so they neither thrive themselves nor contribute to our thriving economy.

I have spent my life working with water and the land. Blue-green infrastructure is absolutely vital, and new, smarter ways to work with nature are developing constantly. As we transition to net zero and sustainable development and growth and develop green energy solutions, we open up a whole sector of future jobs. In the coming decades, jobs and the blue-green economy will be as important as factories and coal mines were in the industrial revolution. We must embrace that opportunity now and use Skills England and the apprenticeship system to get our people ready for jobs in an industry in which we lead the world once again.

Britain has never had the biggest population, the most land or the greatest supply of natural resources, but we have been able to lead the world for centuries because of the skill of British people. We lead through technology, innovation and craftsmanship and through our wonderful natural talent. Britain sparked the industrial revolution and became the workshop of the world because of the skill of its workers, and that is why I am really happy to support this Bill.

5.12 pm

Tom Collins (Worcester) (Lab): I am pleased to see that we have some young people observing us today. Before coming to this place, I worked in research and development, leading a team of talented young engineers who were creating and realising new technologies to tackle the climate crisis. Some of those team members were apprentices, and some had been apprentices earlier in their careers. We faced many challenges, not least from a regulatory environment that struggled to move quickly in innovation and in finding relevant qualifications for new and emerging fields. Some of those challenges are inherent in doing something for the first time, but they were also the result of a UK engineering and industrial sector that had been neglected and, in some places, allowed to stagnate by political leaders who simply did not get it.

I am pleased that this new Government have embraced the values of purposeful, mission-led goal setting alongside agility, partnership and a willingness to act and learn fast. Just like our regulatory environment, our education ecosystem, which delivers skills and qualifications, needs to become more agile and responsive, and this Bill is an early step in that transformation and in reviving the symbiosis of academia and industry in our nations.

Anyone who works in engineering knows that there is no employee quite like an apprentice. Apprentices embody some of the most valuable skills needed in the workplace, such as social competencies that fuel teamwork, empathy, excellent communication, shared purpose, critical thinking and problem-solving skills built on perseverance, experimentation and pragmatism and a can-do attitude backed by hard skills honed in the real world. I have had numerous meetings with our local colleges in Worcester, and they are champing at the bit to deliver the technical and vocational skills needed for the big transformations that our country faces in digital, clean energy and public services. They welcome our changes to reduce bureaucracy and lift demotivating and burdensome requirements for English and maths GCSEs, as well as the changes that we are beginning to make regarding shorter placements and funding bands. They want us to keep going; I have been asked whether we could look at industry-specific flexibility around English and maths for 16 to 18-year-olds, with requirements integrated into standards. I have also been asked about further reviews of apprenticeship standards and funding bands in a wider range of areas, such as hospitality and customer service, and they would like us to keep building on our partnership with the sector, providing clarity about future levy changes and level 7 so that they can plan more effectively.

I am pleased that this Government are making changes that provide the agility and freedom to act quickly and responsively. Innovations in our economy will be founded on innovations in our ecosystem of education and skills. We can see a creative, industrial and innovative renaissance in the UK, and I believe that apprentices will be in the thick of it, delivering the true power of a thriving economy: skills and passionate people. As such, I urge the Secretary of State and our Ministers in the Department for Education to continue this work at pace, and I would like to express the appetite and ambition that is present in Worcester to play our part in delivering the technical and vocational skills of tomorrow through apprenticeships. The people of Worcester are ready to back the Secretary of State's mission and work in partnership with the Government to break down the barriers to opportunity and see our country—and every single person who makes it—thrive.

5.16 pm

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): It is an honour to follow such a passionate speech about apprenticeships from my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Tom Collins). I was going to thank the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) for raising John Ruskin and William Morris in the Chamber—I certainly think they should be mentioned more often—but I will amend my comments to say that it would be nice to have some Opposition Members in the Chamber for this important debate.

Laura Trott: Hey!

Andrew Pakes: It is nice to have some—to have some more would be quite good.

Whereas we have had William Morris and John Ruskin, some colleagues seem to have been getting speechwriting advice from Lewis Carroll, because some of the speeches from Opposition Members have been through the looking glass in their description of the problems and what is happening. We are lost in a debate where people are

stuck on the function of a body, rather than the purpose we are trying to achieve, which is to change and enhance people's lives.

Before I continue, I must declare my interest. Alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins), I am co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on apprenticeships. Apprenticeships are my passion in this House and in life, so I certainly believe that the transfer of functions and assets from the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education to the new Skills England body is an overwhelmingly positive move. It was a proposal made in our manifesto—another promise made and kept by this Government.

The rationale underpinning this Bill is simple enough: the scope of the institute was too limited, and it is letting too many people down. Vitality, Skills England will work with young workers on their learning journey, signposting them through the maze of qualifications and apprenticeship opportunities. More than that, it will identify the skills gaps in our economy and work with the Industrial Strategy Council and the Migration Advisory Committee to plug those gaps. This matters to me, because in Peterborough, we have some of the highest levels of youth unemployment in the country. Apprenticeship starts are down, and unemployment is up.

It is clear to me that the work of Skills England must be aligned with the new industrial strategy, something we heard too little about from Opposition Members in their discussions of this issue. It does not matter what structure we have if we do not have industrial purpose, which this Government will bring to our growth mission, but also to our mission to remove barriers and transform lives. We must have cross-departmental, cross-agency, joined-up working to deliver the skills revolution and take us out of the old silos. When the Minister replies to the debate, I encourage her to detail how the industrial strategy and new Skills England bodies will work together to create those transformational opportunities. I also invite her to talk about how the growth and skills levy will fit together with Skills England, enabling us to deliver on those ambitions.

Our No. 1 mission is economic growth, spread to every part of the UK and built on a diverse base of industries and services. That mission will be hamstrung unless we unleash a skills revolution. The first report of Skills England made that clear, and it shows the scale of the challenge. Employer investment in training has been in steady decline over the past decade, with training expenditure at its lowest level since records began in 2011. Investment per employee is down 19% in real terms. I know from talking to business leaders in my constituency that they find the qualifications landscape and the institute bewildering. They tell me that skills supply is often mismatched against demand and that there are insufficient ways to encourage employers to invest in skills. I know from talking to learners in my constituency that the journeys into careers are poorly signposted and often blocked. Learners too often lack the essential literacy, numeracy and digital skills they need prior to apprenticeships to get the jobs they need.

In short, we do not have the skilled workers to do the future jobs that will drive growth. This Bill goes a long way to addressing that by setting up the institution and the purpose to get us there. Apprenticeships are the golden thread that run through this Government's ambitions

[Andrew Pakes]

for growth. The new Skills England must recognise the centrality of apprenticeships to that and bring them centre stage into our economy.

As so many others in the Chamber have discussed today, the breadth, talent and determination of the apprentices I have met has been humbling, whether that is the butchers' apprentices in Newborough, construction apprentices at Laing O'Rourke building a new Olympia or creative learners at the Fashion Retail Academy. Recently, I was delighted to welcome engineering apprentices from Caterpillar in my constituency to talk to us.

These apprenticeships will give young people a clearer route into careers where the nation has skills gaps. The new levy we are talking about will fund short apprenticeships, giving learners and employers greater flexibility. Overall, we must elevate the status of apprenticeships in our society and culture. I am not decrying our universities, but we must end the snobbery that says an apprenticeship is second-best to a degree. We must tackle the outmoded idea that learning and earning is a lesser option for young people. We do not hear that lazy trope in Sweden or Germany, and we should never hear it here in the UK. My third question to the Minister is: how will Skills England work through this legislation to elevate the role of apprenticeships in our society?

Skills and apprenticeships are not only the engine of growth, but the ladder of opportunity. The Minister will have seen the excellent briefings on this Bill from the Co-operative Group, of which I am a member, and one of its central challenges is that we should not just be creating more apprenticeships, but ensuring that Skills England has a responsibility to improve outcomes for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, including working-class kids in my constituency. That will ensure that the new body has social mobility baked into it from its inception. That will not only deliver better outcomes for those from working-class backgrounds, but will encourage Skills England to thoroughly measure the impact. When the Minister responds to the debate, will she talk about how we will measure the impact in cities such as mine, as well as the country as a whole?

This is a wonderful Bill, and I am pleased to support it. I am pleased to put on record my support to the ministerial team, particularly Baroness Smith of Malvern in the other House, who has been kind with her time and brilliant with this Bill.

5.22 pm

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): My driving focus as the MP for Hertford and Stortford is to make our community an even better place to live, work and learn. I am delighted to speak in this debate today, and I have no doubt that the Bill will allow us to harness the talents of our young people through ambitious skills reform that will drive growth and unlock opportunity.

Our young people in Hertford and Stortford are keen to take advantage of these opportunities, and the confidence that apprenticeships instil in our young people cannot be overstated. Earlier this month, I had the pleasure of visiting the Hertford regional college's Ware campus to mark National Apprenticeship Week. It was great to meet some of its talented hairdressing apprentices and hear how they are starting to fill jobs at small and

medium-sized businesses in our local area and to learn more about HRC's apprenticeship offer for my constituents.

In our community, we can see how apprenticeships are helping young people to find the path that is right for them, develop skills for life and drive the local economy, but for too long, those opportunities have been out of reach for too many young people in our area, leaving those for whom traditional education does not work, who want to pursue an apprenticeship or another form of education, to slip through the cracks. Apprenticeship starts crashed under the watch of the previous Government. A broken apprenticeships levy let down businesses and young people alike, and both are now crying out for change.

I am pleased that this Government will introduce a new growth and skills levy, enabling employers to access a broader range of higher quality training offers, providing them with more flexibility and helping learners to access opportunities that will improve their lives.

The Department for Education's employer skills survey showed that about 36% of all UK vacancies in 2022 were skills shortage vacancies—a huge increase from 22% in 2017, and a clear indicator of the damage done to the economy by the lack of a strong skills offer. This Labour Government will tackle the critical skills shortages that have hamstrung our economy, and apprenticeships will power this mission-driven Government and our Plan for Change.

We know that the skills needed for economic growth come from the community up. The Bill will pave the way for Skills England to find and fill skills gaps, ensuring that our skills and apprenticeship offer can harness the talent of young people in communities such as mine and deliver the growth that our country needs. It will allow us to build a skills system that empowers our young people, caters to their diverse talents, and once again restores skills as a national priority. Most important, it will provide the tools for young people in Hertford and Stortford to break down the barriers to opportunity, find the path that is right for them, and reach their full potential. I will proudly vote for it this evening.

5.25 pm

Dan Aldridge (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): The Bill constitutes a significant step towards streamlining and strengthening our technical education and apprenticeship system, and, as someone who worked in the apprenticeships sector in different roles, I am a big fan. So many of us have seen at first hand how apprenticeships transform lives—how they build dignity in young people's work, and help them to establish fulfilling careers. Joy at all this unlocked potential has, however, been continually frustrated by the decline in apprenticeships that we have seen over the past decade. This decline must be reversed, and that, surely, is an aim that can unite the House. It is what this Bill is about: delivering the step change in skills that we so desperately need if we are to rebuild our communities and our country.

My constituents must be able to earn, learn and thrive because of what we do in this place, not in spite of it. In towns such as Weston-super-Mare and Worle, technical education and apprenticeships are fundamental to enterprise, prosperity and economic independence for our young people. Sadly, however, towns like mine

have never been able to take full advantage of those benefits, because of red tape and because of the hoops that providers and small and medium-sized enterprises have had to jump through. For too long we have seen a fragmented technical education system plagued by that red tape and by inefficiencies.

Given the huge responsibility and expectation on this Government to deliver significantly improved life chances for communities, we must break down barriers and blocks to progress everywhere, and we must be bold in the way in which we restructure the state to make it deliver. Our employers, our training providers and, most important, our apprentices deserve a system that is responsive, transparent, and aligned with the needs of our economy and our society. The young people of Weston-super-Mare are bursting with potential and ambition, but they have often been let down by needless bureaucracy and a lack of the right opportunities and resources—and the right information, advice and guidance—to enable them to develop the skills that are needed by today's employers. Communities like mine have been left behind by successive skills strategies that have overlooked the nuances in our local economies, especially when it comes to supporting the needs of the SMEs that provide the overwhelming majority of private sector employment in towns such as mine—whether we are talking about Weston-super-Mare association football club, the Ascot Group or our beloved grand pier.

This Bill removes bureaucracy, and will make the system work better. It allows the Secretary of State to act swiftly when necessary, to respond to industry's needs and to deliver the flexibility that is crucial in a job market where skills requirements are constantly evolving and moving on at an unprecedented pace. If we are serious about providing high-quality technical education, closing the skills gap and developing our workforce, we must structure our institutions to achieve those goals. We must also ensure that towns up and down the country that sit outside cities and, currently, outside combined authority areas—such as Weston-super-Mare—are fully considered, are not left behind in any reforms of skills and apprenticeships, and have a seat at the table when it comes to skills and growth plans. The Bill is a huge step in the right direction, and I urge all my colleagues on both sides of the House to support it.

5.29 pm

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): For too long, our skills system has not delivered due to policies that simply have not worked. Businesses have struggled to recruit the skilled workers they need, young people do not have the opportunities they deserve and investment in training has gone backwards. The previous Government talked a good game and introduced measures such as the apprenticeship levy with big promises, but in reality their approach was slow, bureaucratic and failed to deliver.

It is worth noting, as I said in my interventions on Conservative Members, that I feel their criticism of the Bill today has focused far too much on structures, not outcomes, but since they have done that, I think it is worth reiterating this point. The Standards and Testing Agency sets the statutory assessments for school pupils, and it develops professional skills tests for trainee teachers. It is an Executive agency, just as Skills England will be, and it was formally a non-departmental public body,

just as IfATE was. However, the Standards and Testing Agency was set up in October 2011, so I am not sure that criticisms of structures actually hold any merit; rather, they are a distraction from the record of the Conservative party. On its watch, investment in skills fell and apprenticeship starts dropped. Critical sectors are still facing chronic skills shortages, and employers up and down the country have been left navigating a system that just does not work for them. That is why this Bill is so important. It is about fixing what is broken and making sure that our skills system actually works for workers, businesses and the wider economy.

To celebrate National Apprenticeship Week, I visited Basingstoke College of Technology to talk to its current class of carpentry and joinery apprentices, and to speak to college leaders. It was a particular privilege for me because my dad was a carpenter. He left school at 15 with no qualifications, but in the trade that he learned on the job he had skill and pride in his craft. He did not have the opportunity that many young people I met last week in Basingstoke have, with the fantastic support structures around apprentices today and more that we are going to build, as well as all the brilliant ways in which apprenticeships can help turbocharge the careers of so many talented and skilled young people.

One thing that was made very clear to me from my visit to BCOT alone is that it is massively oversubscribed for many of the apprenticeships it offers. That worries me, because it shows that too many young people are not getting access to the resources they need to learn a trade and are being left behind by more than a decade of failure to deliver. So I am pleased that this Government, through this Bill, are working harder and faster—with their very first education Bill to be introduced—to cut red tape and give people greater opportunities to start apprenticeships.

With 1,250 apprentices currently training in Basingstoke, 310 just starting and 110 having just completed their courses, the Labour Government are already making progress, but there is much more to do. I want Basingstoke to be the best place for someone to learn a trade, start a career and build a life for themselves, and I believe this Bill will help to deliver just that, laying the groundwork to establish Skills England and taking a step towards a more joined-up and responsive approach.

Skills England will replace the current fragmented system with one that properly assesses national and regional skills needs, which will be absolutely crucial if we are to meet the challenges of the future. That will ensure we are training people for the jobs that actually exist in the places where they are actually needed. This is not just about cutting red tape; it is about making sure that our approach to apprenticeships and technical education is fit for the modern economy. For years, the system has been tied up in rigid, outdated rules that make it harder to respond to the fast-changing needs of industries such as digital, green energy and advanced manufacturing. The changes in this Bill will allow for a more flexible, forward-thinking approach that actually meets the needs of employers and workers alike. A big part of that is replacing the old apprenticeship levy, which has been too restrictive, with a new growth and skills levy, which will give employers the freedom to invest in a wider range of training opportunities.

[Luke Murphy]

As other Members have said, we must put an end to the snobbery around skills and apprenticeships. For too long, highly skilled and essential trades have not been given the recognition they deserve. Too often they have been seen as somehow less valuable than the careers that require a university degree, despite being just as vital, just as skilled and just as valuable to our economy and society. I am proud that this Government are changing that narrative. We need these skills to drive growth, build the homes and infrastructure that we need and deliver energy security. We have the opportunity here to fix the mistakes of the past and to build something better. I urge colleagues to support the Bill, because a strong skills system is not just good for business and the economy, but good for everyone.

5.35 pm

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): As co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on apprenticeships, alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes), I welcome the Government's focus on this crucial aspect of skills policy. They have inherited a wildly diverse and dysfunctional skills landscape. I would not go so far as to describe what we have as a skills system, which would seem to suggest something far more considered and structured than what currently exists. This Bill is the Government's first very small legislative step towards addressing the skills crisis that is one of our nation's biggest barriers to growth and productivity.

It is almost impossible to have a meeting with an employer—private or public sector—without the issue of the UK's skills deficit arising. Apprenticeships are a crucial but criminally underutilised dimension of providing Britain's learners with an opportunity to earn while they learn, and provide our employers with skilled and qualified workers who contribute in the workplace as they develop the skills they will need. Indeed, the Government's ambitious aspirations for growth will remain purely aspirations if the current failure in our skills approach is not rectified.

The right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott) suggested that the previous Conservative Government's record on apprenticeships was world class, but I beg to differ. In discussing apprenticeships, it is worth first identifying what is wrong with the current system before considering the extent to which the Bill moves us towards resolution of those issues.

First, it is estimated that around £480 million will be left unspent in the major employers' apprenticeship levy pot this year. FE News reported in February 2024 that SME apprenticeship starts had fallen by 49% since the introduction of the apprenticeship levy, with the cost, rigidity and bureaucracy of the current system all cited as reasons why SMEs do not take on apprentices. Level 2 and 3 apprenticeships, in particular, have suffered, with a 53% reduction since the introduction of the levy, while a growing portion of the levy pot is being spent on degree-level courses.

Degree-level apprenticeships should be a huge social mobility tool, with learners from poorer backgrounds who might be dissuaded from attending university relishing the opportunity to secure a degree while working and without accruing debt. However, recent research has

shown, shockingly, that degree apprenticeships are being swept up by the wealthier students, with free school meals pupils less likely to get a degree apprenticeship than to get a place at Oxbridge.

Finally, the completion rate of apprenticeships is worryingly low, at just 54.3% of all students, compared with 97% of A-level students passing across all subjects. This is due to many causes; the Government have set about addressing one by removing the need to pass functional maths and English in order to complete an apprenticeship for under-19s. However, there also needs to be a much greater link between the completion of the apprenticeship and the fitness-to-practise requirements. Many learners do not complete the apprenticeship, but not because they have failed—they may well have secured the skills they needed to start work, and do not see the apprenticeship as being relevant once the job has been secured. There is, therefore, a great deal for the noble Baroness Smith, in the other place, to sink her teeth into.

This Bill is the Skills England Bill that dare not speak its name. By abolishing IfATE, it lays the groundwork for the creation of Skills England. There are important questions for the Government to answer, and I hope that when my hon. Friend the Minister responds to the debate, she will be able to enlighten us on a number of them. First, is she concerned that Skills England will have the necessary weight and independence to bring about the scale of change that its own report acknowledged was necessary? What will the extended scope of Skills England be, beyond the identification of standards and the potential alternative use of the Government's new growth and skills levy?

If the Minister is not clear about what shape Skills England will take post IfATE, is she concerned about abolishing IfATE without being clear on what will replace it and where the responsibility for those functions will fall? Can she say any more about how the voice of employers will be heard when the powers are centralised with the Secretary of State? There may be huge enthusiasm for the Secretary of State taking a more streamlined approach, on occasions, to the process of creating new standards, as IfATE is seen as too cumbersome. However, does she agree that that must be the exception rather than the rule? How will she ensure that employers' voices are still heard? Can she also confirm that the powers to approve standards will indeed pass to Skills England once that has been created, and can she say any more about the role of Skills England with regard to the growth and skills levy?

I very much welcome Baroness Smith's announcement about removing the need for passing maths and English for students who are over 19, but has the Minister done any assessment of the merits of that for students under the age of 19? I am interested in understanding the arguments in favour of that change for over 19s that do not apply to students who are under 19.

I hugely welcome the Government's commitment to this area of policy and the positive initial steps. I suspect that it will not be news to my hon. Friend that I think that far greater systemic change is needed if we are to deliver the more transformational change that our employers, our learners and, indeed, our nation desperately need.

5.41 pm

Lauren Edwards (Rochester and Strood) (Lab): I do not support the amendment but will speak in favour of the Bill.

As many have highlighted, there is a gap between the skills needed by employers and the skills held by the UK workforce. Skills shortage vacancies have been on the rise year after year, and the latest data shows that a third of all vacancies are due to skills shortages. It is holding our country back and, therefore, the system needs to change. The immediate skills gaps need to be addressed urgently, but just as pressing is the need to have a single body that considers the skills that our businesses will need 10, 20 or 30 years from now, with 1.4 million new jobs predicted by 2035 alone. Many of those new jobs will need technical green skills, digital skills and understanding of artificial intelligence.

If our Government are to achieve the changes in this country that so many people voted for—more homes, green energy and economic growth that puts money back into people's pockets—skills are the key ingredient. The importance of apprenticeships and technical qualifications to that mission cannot be underestimated. Indeed, I was immensely proud when the Prime Minister and the Education Secretary visited MidKent College in my constituency before the election to set out their ambition to put vocational education on the same footing as academic university education.

If Skills England is to achieve its aims and help us to meet the skills challenges our country faces, it must cover all areas. I therefore welcome the Bill, which folds IfATE into Skills England to enable that integrated approach to support our labour market and economy.

As others have mentioned, the Bill will make Skills England an Executive agency of the Department for Education. I am pleased that Ministers amended the Bill in the other place to require the Secretary of State to lay a report before Parliament detailing the exercise of functions conferred on her by the Bill. I understand that will also make clear the functions that Skills England will take on and the expected effects of those functions. I likewise welcome the commitment to publishing details of the framework that will be used to hold Skills England to account for its delivery and its relationship with employers. The clarity those documents will provide is most welcome.

I will also take this opportunity briefly to welcome the reforms announced by the Government during National Apprenticeship Week. The apprenticeship levy under the former Government, well meaning though it was, was too cumbersome and restrictive for too many employers and learners. As a result, apprenticeship starts fell off a cliff, and the latest data on apprenticeship completion shows a rate of just 55% in England. I am therefore pleased that the Government have listened to employers and training providers and committed to making the new growth and skills levy, which will replace the apprenticeship levy, simpler, more flexible and employer-led. I note that Skills England will be tasked with carrying out analysis of the broader types of training that will be eligible under the new levy and I look forward to seeing the outcome of that work, which will be hugely beneficial to employers and apprentices.

A common issue with the current apprenticeship schemes in this country, as others have mentioned, is that it does not work for small and medium-sized

enterprises, which do not have large human resources departments to help navigate the often complex skills landscape. Nowhere is this more apparent than in my local authority area of Medway where 90% of all businesses are SMEs. Can the Minister set out how the Government will ensure that the voices of SMEs will be heard, so that we get an apprenticeship framework that works for all types of businesses? That is particularly important if we are to drive growth across all parts of the country. I know, for instance, that there are some larger businesses looking at how they can provide practical apprenticeship support to SMEs in their supply chain, so it would be good to know whether the Government are considering how they can best incentivise approaches such as this, which will help hugely by “de-risking” apprenticeships for SMEs.

Likewise, I know that there are some amazing smaller training providers. I have a fantastic women-led one in my constituency called Umbrella Training. It is equally important that these providers' experiences and needs are reflected in the new apprenticeship system.

There are always risks associated with change; that is unavoidable. There is obviously some concern that the transfer of IfATE to Skills England may lead to a level of disruption, so it would be helpful if the Minister provided details of the main risks identified by her Department for the transition and how they will be managed and mitigated. Doing so would help to provide assurance to those currently undertaking apprenticeships and other technical qualifications, as well as to employers. It will be particularly important to ensure that the knowledge and expertise of staff at IfATE—no doubt built up over many years—is not lost during this process.

It will also be helpful for Skills England to set out a number of other issues in due course, such as what changes may be proposed to the local skills improvement plan framework, and assurance that local areas will be able to prioritise sectors or industries that are key to driving their local economy that may not feature in the Government's industrial strategy, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) earlier in the debate. Anything further that the Minister can say on these points at this stage would be welcome.

Finally, clause 6 removes the requirement to review technical educational qualifications at regular intervals. Instead, the Secretary of State will have the flexibility to focus on reviews based on need. It would be helpful if, in her response, the Minister outlined what steps will be taken to ensure that the quality and relevance of qualifications is maintained under the new framework.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Before I call the next speaker, may I gently remind Members that their speeches should be no longer than five minutes?

5.47 pm

Maya Ellis (Ribble Valley) (Lab): Like many of my colleagues, I found that this year's National Apprenticeship Week really brought to life the amazing work being done by businesses, organisations and students across my constituency. Listening to many of the comments from across the House about how we need to improve the culture and perception around technical education, I am minded to reflect on the experience that I had when I was in year 9 and getting quite high results in my electronics exams. I had an amazing teacher, Miss Robinson,

[Maya Ellis]

who asked me one day whether I would consider doing a BTEC in engineering. I did not end up following that technical route, but I do wonder what our productivity would be today if, back then, our culture had promoted it more prominently, particularly for people who were very academic.

I am really excited at the prospect of the Bill laying the groundwork for the new body, Skills England, to realise our ambitious missions for opportunity and growth. One of the best commitments in this Government's manifesto was to link immigration and skills policy in an effort to tackle the UK's reliance on international recruitment. Indeed, during the general election campaign, I was on a panel with fellow candidates in Lancashire and explained our commitment, and a fellow candidate standing for Reform remarked that he actually really liked that idea. I will be interested to see whether his colleagues agree today.

Skills England will work closely with the Migration Advisory Committee and Industrial Strategy Council to develop an evidence-based approach to the labour market, with the committee set to monitor sectors where skill shortages are leading to increases in overseas recruitment. Importantly, this will mean that there will be a focus on sectors reliant on overseas workers to ensure that they are addressing their failure to invest in skills in the UK. To support British workers as best we can, it is promising to hear that international recruitment will not be the standard choice for employers filling skill shortages. Although migration can play a strategic role in supporting our economy, it must not be utilised as a means to address skills or training shortages in the UK over supporting British workers here. In general, we are far too familiar with pressing skills gaps negatively affecting our economy. Some 20% of our UK workforce may be significantly under-skilled for their jobs by 2030, and 1.5 million jobs in England are at risk of at least some of their tasks being automated in future.

There are businesses and organisations leading the charge in tackling this. In my previous life away from this place, I was privileged to work alongside the Lancashire skills and employment hub and the Lancashire digital skills partnership, which have long been pioneers for developing our skills landscape in this country. I would like to put on record my thanks to Michele Lawty-Jones and Kerry Harrison, who lead those services, piloting programmes such as the skills bootcamps, which they made such a success of in Lancashire that the previous Government rolled them out nationally.

Their hard work also secured the Lancashire and Cumbria institute of technology, which I was delighted to visit last week at the Preston college base in my constituency. Its principal, Simon Nixon, and many students spoke to me about the technical training that they receive in health and social care, construction, counselling and engineering. Vitally, Preston college collaborates closely with industry experts and businesses to ensure that its curriculum is up to date and reflects the needs of the economy. It is working with around 950 employers who help design the curriculum, support assessments and offer mentoring and industry placements for its IoT students. A great example of that is its work with Leyland Trucks, which reported a need for electric vehicle training for its apprentices. The college embedded a new module into its institute of technology course.

A key need that Preston college meets is providing increased adult education opportunities. The upcoming devolution deal in Lancashire will undoubtedly allow organisations to have an increased say in adult education budgets, to boost local productivity and foster the right opportunities for the north-west. However, the college is concerned about the reported 2% to 3% reduction in adult skills budgets. For colleges that have little adult work or that have struggled to deliver against contract, that might be less of a problem, but Preston college gets around 20% of its income from adult provision and has been able to over-deliver for the past few years. Any reduction applied across the board would hit Preston college's delivery, particularly in key areas such as construction and English for speakers of other languages, and is likely to add to cost pressures already felt.

Undoubtedly, we are under severe financial pressure at the moment, but we need to be careful that short-term savings do not impact the long-term skills development that we desperately need to lead us to a better financial outlook. I welcome the Minister's comments on that. What really blew me away at Preston college was the feel of the place. It felt inspiring, modern and a place to really grow. I heard from students who had had negative experiences elsewhere but felt truly at home there. That is what Government investment can do for the wellbeing of areas in need of growth. That is the opportunity we have with this Bill.

BAE Systems is another business operating in my constituency that offers fantastic training and skills opportunities, particularly through apprenticeships. I was moved on a recent visit, on which I was delighted to be joined by the Minister for Skills, Baroness Smith, by a young person who had tried a few times to get a role at BAE Systems. Because of the multitude of inclusive routes that BAE provides young people to end up on one of its apprenticeships, he eventually found a route that allowed his strengths and potential to shine, enabling him to secure a role.

I know from having worked in economic development in Lancashire that many local SMEs have benefited from BAE Systems over-training on its apprenticeship programmes, so that there is a supply of apprentices who can flow into the surrounding SME chain. As many Members have noted, a big challenge is how we encourage SMEs to support apprenticeships when they may need only one or two apprentices. The route that BAE went down came from targeted Government funding. I would welcome the Government's considering something similar. BAE had the training infrastructure to provide the support much more efficiently than most SMEs would be able to do themselves. We should maximise our productivity in how we train people by making the most of the successful structures that we already have.

I am delighted that almost half of people starting apprenticeships in Ribble Valley in the past year were aged over 25, showing that people in my constituency are ambitious and committed to lifelong learning. I fully support the Bill and I cannot wait to see Skills England established, to support those looking to improve their skills by bringing about a more data-driven and joined-up skills system for all of us.

5.54 pm

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): It is often said that the UK is increasingly a knowledge economy; a place where our growth and jobs come both from trading

ideas and information as well as physical goods. This Government's plan for growth clearly recognises that and plays to our strengths, which is why we are now the second most attractive country to invest in globally, according to a recent PWC report. However, it is vital that the benefits are felt equally across our country.

Areas with a proud industrial heritage like my constituency of Mansfield did not get the investment and training programmes they needed under previous Governments, and our young people have suffered the consequences of that. Many of them face an unenviable choice between staying trapped in unstable and low-quality employment or leaving their home towns to seek opportunity elsewhere in the country. My election in July was a resounding vote for change in Mansfield, and my first mission for the constituency was to fight for a growing economy with good-quality jobs for everyone. For that reason, I will be pleased to vote for the Bill, which is a major step of progress in the Government's reform of the skills and apprenticeships system.

Apprenticeships are a critical component for high-quality jobs in Mansfield. On my visits to businesses around my constituency, I have been fortunate enough to see the great work already being done by some of our employers, working in partnership with West Notts college and Nottingham Trent University. That includes: local aerospace and nuclear electronics company Glenair, which recently took on 60 apprentices; Power Saving Solutions in Warsop; and Capita in Mansfield, which is doing particularly good work to support people with disabilities to access and sustain employment through apprenticeships. They are providing opportunities not just for school leavers but for those who are retraining and getting back into the world of work. We must not underestimate the importance of that for those individuals, the local economy or for productivity and growth nationally. We need to be doing more to encourage that type of opportunity in my constituency and across the country.

I therefore welcome the changes that we will vote on today. In particular, the transfer of powers from the old Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education to the new Skills England body and the reform of the apprenticeship levy are two measures that will help bring together under one roof the patchwork of schemes and organisations that currently exists and result in a more flexible system that will give our local training pioneers the support they need.

Britain needs to begin the process of reskilling workers. I draw attention to the work that Nottingham Trent is doing with West Notts to encourage adult learners, facilitating direct entry into the renewables workforce, which is another great example. I expect the impacts to be transformative for Mansfield in the long term. For that reason, I end by inviting the Minister to visit my constituency, where she will be able to see for herself the start made in upskilling our young people and adults as well as how far these changes will go in delivering secure, fulfilling, well-paid employment.

Mansfield is a place with significant latent potential. I believe that a keen-eyed collaboration between local businesses, further and higher education and the Government will support our formerly neglected area to realise the potential that we have.

5.58 pm

Kirith Entwistle (Bolton North East) (Lab): Too many young people are being let down by a skills and training system that does not work for them. For too long, Britain has been a country where technical education has been treated as second class, skills shortages stifled success and talent went untapped. Let us be clear: the Conservatives' legacy has failed our young people and they cannot keep using the pandemic as an excuse. Between October 2023 and September 2024, 41% of people aged 16 to 24 were economically inactive in the north-west; nationally, that number was 11.4%. I would be really interested to hear what Conservative Members have to say to young people in the north-west.

In the last two years, skills shortages have left more than a third of UK vacancies unfilled while the number of 16 to 24-year-olds looking for work has doubled. That is over 420,000 young people wanting to work and to contribute to our economy, but, without the right training, they cannot get those jobs that need filling—jobs that they could thrive in if we had the right skills system.

Our young people are not lazy. Rather, it is the system the Conservatives left behind that has failed them. Visiting businesses in Bolton, I know that employers are desperate for skilled workers and that they recognise skills training and apprenticeships as a way forward. The young apprentices I have met in Bolton are thriving. They have security, skills and a clear path ahead, and that confidence is transforming lives and livelihoods. That is why I am proud that, through this Bill, this Labour Government are establishing Skills England. Skills are not second class; they are the backbone of Britain. Skills England will break barriers that have left entire regions such as mine behind.

In Bolton, we have already seen what works. Bolton Lads and Girls Club, part of the outstanding youth charity OnSide, has achieved remarkable success with its On Track initiative. This programme provides one-to-one support for young people who are not in education, employment or training, offering practical help with CV building, interview preparation and visits to businesses. But more than that, it broadens their horizons, showing them the many promising alternatives to the traditional university route and pathways that may better suit their skills and ambitions.

I recently visited Bolton college during National Apprenticeship Week. Its apprenticeship programme is another shining example of how investment in skills transforms lives. From health and early years education to engineering, digital skills and low-carbon construction, Bolton college is equipping young people with the expertise that businesses urgently need. During my visit, it was clear that the apprenticeship levy's rigid restrictions—allowing funds to cover training but not wages—were directly preventing businesses from hiring more apprentices, so I sincerely hope that Skills England will review the levy so that more young people can earn while they learn and employers can fill those critical skills gaps.

The successes of OnSide and Bolton college provide proof of what happens when we invest in skills and opportunities. Now we must take those lessons and scale them up nationally. This Bill and Skills England are not just about educational reform; they are an economic necessity and critical for growth, because Britain cannot build, grow or lead without a workforce that is skilled for the future.

[*Kirith Entwistle*]

But let us also be clear about what Skills England is not. It is not another quango, it is not more red tape, and it is not just another Government agency. Skills England is a promise to young people that their future does not have to follow a single path, a promise to businesses that they will have the workforce that they need to thrive, and a promise to this country that Britain's best days are ahead, not behind us. We need more builders, engineers, coders, carers and welders—the people who power this country—and I am proud that this Labour Government are ending the snobbery around skills and finally putting apprenticeships on an equal footing with academia. I wholeheartedly support this Bill and the opportunities that Skills England will create for my constituents, not least young people.

6.2 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I have been proudly championing the very neglected skills and trades sector since arriving in this place because, unfortunately, one of the most toxic legacies of the previous Government is a crisis in education and training, with overwhelming barriers to opportunity for far too many young people and a real downplaying of practical vocational skills in the eyes not only of students but often of their parents and the wider community. This is in stark contrast to what we see across Europe, Australia and the USA.

Apprenticeships offer young people an alternative pathway to success and one that is not only vital for our communities but practical, hands-on and deeply connected to the industries that drive our economy. We must start by ensuring that we value all pathways and people if we are to move towards a productive, highly skilled population and achieve our growth targets. Vocational training is hugely important. However, in 2022, we had nearly 340,000 apprenticeship starts, compared with 520,000 11 years before that. Young people in my city of Portsmouth are not always able to access the well-paid jobs, despite there being many opportunities on our doorstep in the defence, maritime, space, science and trade sectors, to name a few.

We must improve and promote vocational pathways by increasing the number of apprenticeships available, improving apprenticeship completion rates, increasing financial support and increasing the flexibility of courses. This Bill establishing Skills England is the first step to achieving some of the much-needed elevation of our skills sector.

Only a third of apprenticeships are completed. That is a shockingly low statistic, and it could be improved by increasing financial support. It is therefore welcome to see the 18% increase in apprenticeship rate pay from April to help make apprenticeships more attractive. It would be good to see more targeted support made available to those who have dependants and other financial responsibilities.

I welcome the Government's commitment to look again at the levy and the length of apprenticeships. Adopting a modular structure and increasing flexibility could significantly boost competition rates by providing a more adaptable learning experience. Increasing the flexibility of apprenticeships also accommodates diverse learning needs and life circumstances, making it easier

for apprentices to balance work and training alongside personal and financial commitments. I look forward to Skills England examining those issues in a new chapter for innovative thinking on apprenticeships.

In my constituency of Portsmouth North, the City of Portsmouth college is a centre of excellence for apprenticeship training, especially in the areas of gas engineering and refrigeration, air conditioning and heat pump engineering. The college plays a vital role in equipping young people with the skills they need and we need as a city and a country. The college's gas assessment centre is now the leading provider of gas assessment training in Portsmouth, Hampshire and West Sussex, ensuring that our region remains at the forefront of those essential industries. From skilled trades, such as bricklaying, electrical engineering, carpentry and plastering, to professional careers in business administration, accounting and early years education, the range of courses reflects the diverse needs of our local workforce.

Crucially, the programmes are supported by strong partnerships with major employers, including BAE, Airbus, Queen Alexandra hospital, the NHS and of course the Royal Navy. The partnerships not only ensure that apprentices receive a direct link to potential careers, but mean that students can feel the value of training and future opportunities. The success of that approach is evident, and I am particularly proud to mention James Rowland, an apprentice in refrigeration, air conditioning and heat pump engineering who won silver in the WorldSkills UK RACHP competition in December—an incredible achievement that showcases the high calibre of training and people in my city.

We must recognise the importance of sustainability in our skills development. Earlier this year, the City of Portsmouth college facilitated access to green skills funding, enabling local plumbing and heating businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises, to train apprentices in sustainability. That is precisely the kind of forward-thinking initiative that ensures our workforce remain prepared for the challenges of the future, and I am proud that my city is embracing those opportunities and looking forward to extending them with Skills England.

6.7 pm

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): A Government who are ambitious about growth need to be serious about skills, because without the workforce trained to build and insulate the homes we need, to install the next generation of electric vehicle charging infrastructure, to deliver excellent health and social care and to deliver high-quality early years education, none of the Government's missions are achievable. Better skills mean good, often well-paid jobs. Apprenticeships are a driver of social mobility, and I am determined that my constituents feel the benefit of those opportunities. Skills England will have much to do to pull together a fractured skills landscape and deliver real change, but the Bill will enable it to make a solid start.

My constituency is home to the excellent further education college Bracknell and Wokingham college, which already does so much to offer young people the chance to deliver the skills of the future in everything from social care to sustainable technologies, from pharmaceuticals to construction. The college trains over

100 electrical installation apprentices, providing them with hands-on training in state-of-the-art electrical installation workshops, which were recently renovated with more than £200,000 of investment. The facility ensures that learners gain practical experience with the latest industry-standard equipment, preparing them for high-demand roles in electrical engineering, construction and sustainable technologies.

Last week, I visited the Bracknell Forest skills hub, led by Nikki Burns, a small business owner with years of experience. The hub is proactively identifying with employers where the skills gaps are, working with potential and existing employees to address those gaps, and teaming up with education providers, including my local college, to design bespoke courses to plug the gap, all backed with support from local and national Government. Since launching in September, the skills hub has already engaged with over 40 businesses, offered tailored support for over 50 jobseekers, trained 300 employees and built two bespoke courses. That is a system working as it should, but we need more collaboration, and Skills England will have a huge role to play in identifying skills gaps at both national and local levels, and in ensuring that businesses and Government are talking to each other.

Businesses understand the value of good skills and apprenticeships for their workforce. Waitrose, whose head office is in my constituency, is just one example. It currently has 1,200 partners on live apprenticeships across 30 schemes. When I visited Waitrose last year to meet some of its apprentices, I saw the true range of opportunities available, from people training up to look after Waitrose's delivery fleet and maintain its bodywork to apprentices studying for a T-level in finance, in partnership with Bracknell and Wokingham college. Smaller-scale schemes also offer routes into employment. Waitrose's "Building Happier Futures" programme is designed to support care-experienced young people—including those who have been in kinship care—into work.

When I have spoken to Waitrose and other businesses in my constituency, they have told me that among the barriers they face to offering more apprenticeships are the inflexibility of the apprenticeship levy and the overly burdensome requirements needed to run and recruit to an apprenticeship. That is why the reforms to apprenticeships that the Government announced two weeks ago are so very welcome. They will provide more flexibility for employers and those who want to take up these opportunities, shorten the length of some apprenticeships, and scrap the need for adult apprentices to pass English and maths GCSE. Those are common-sense changes backed by business. To be successful, Skills England will also need to get a grip on the lengthy time that it takes to update frameworks, to ensure that apprenticeships always remain at the cutting edge.

It is also vital that opportunities be genuinely open to all, including those with additional needs. Data from the Office for National Statistics shows that only 29% of autistic people are in paid employment—that is not good enough. More targeted support is needed at local and national level to ensure that more autistic people can better access apprenticeships and other skills. Bracknell Forest council is currently looking at how to address that autism employment gap, particularly through more support into apprenticeships and other forms of work experience.

Skills England has a huge job ahead of it. Our country has too often relied on importing skills rather than nurturing our own talent, which is not progressive, and too many young people have missed out on valuable opportunities. Skills gaps are preventing us from building, growing and thriving. Skills England will be at the vanguard of the Government's work to fix all that—no small task, but one for which the reward is great.

6.12 pm

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): I am proud to be a Derby MP and to represent a city with incredible engineering, manufacturing and technological expertise and skills. We make things in Derby. Yes, we have industrial giants such as Rolls-Royce, Alstom and Toyota, but we also have the brilliant small and medium-sized companies in their supply chains and more broadly, from a wide range of industries including rail, defence, nuclear energy, food production, aviation and digital technology.

What attracts so many businesses to Derby is our skilled workforce, but I know that even our city feels this country's skills shortages. Under the previous Government, a third of UK job vacancies were a result of skills shortages, and the uptake of level 4 and 5 technical training in England fell to historically low levels. I warmly welcome the Bill, which lays the groundwork for the establishment of Skills England to assess and help to address our skills shortages.

Larger companies in Derby have been investing in skills and apprenticeships. The Rolls-Royce nuclear skills academy, for example, offers 200 apprenticeships a year, working with the University of Derby and Derby college. The Toyota academy provides skills not just for its own apprentices but for partner companies too. Many of our small and medium-sized employers are investing in their future by investing in skills, such as tech company Barron McCann, which I recently visited, and engineering firm Tidycy, which supports apprentices but also goes into local schools to teach young people the metalwork skills they need to make metal toolboxes. However, I have met many businesses that say that finding skilled workers is one of the greatest challenges they face and that under the last Government, they found apprenticeships too difficult and too inflexible to access.

We are fortunate in Derby to have Derby College, which is one of the largest FE colleges in the UK, and University Technical College Derby, which both work closely with employers to ensure they are providing the skills needed. One of the students told me that what he loved about learning at the UTC was that he felt he was learning something real. We have more than 3,000 apprentices in Derby, but I know that we need many, many more, and it is not just people starting out who need careers; we also need to reskill our workforce and allow those in mid-career to move into new roles and new industries.

I want to raise skills shortages in a sector close to my heart. Last week, my hon. Friend the Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker) and I held a meeting organised for us by the Rail Forum with the rail sector about skills. I often meet people in rail who talk about the sector as Britain's best kept secret, with people sometimes joining by accident but staying because of the range of opportunities it offers, from engineering to customer services, project management to catering, digital roles, technicians and many more.

[Catherine Atkinson]

The Rail Delivery Group identifies that rail adds some £98 billion annually to local economies and £26 billion in environmental and social benefits, but the National Skills Academy for Rail reports that a third of the rail workforce are 50 or over and estimates that some 75,000 people will leave the industry by 2030 through retirement or other forms of attrition. This year is the 200th anniversary of the modern railway, which we as a country pioneered, and its future is crucial for growth and decarbonisation. I invite the Minister to encourage Skills England to work with the National Skills Academy for Rail and Great British Railways, which will have its headquarters in Derby, to address the skills shortages we face in rail.

I am really excited that under this Government, we are going to have a proper industrial strategy, and it is essential that we have the right skills and the right infrastructure to get the people and the goods where they need to be. I echo the call from my hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes) for Ministers to set out how Skills England will work across Departments to support our industrial strategy. I urge all Members across the House to support this Bill. I look forward to working with Skills England to ensure that we have the skills we need, that we have opportunities for all and that we keep our economy on track.

6.17 pm

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I start with a fundamental point, which is that education does not always have to happen in a classroom. That is essentially what the Bill is about. Under the last Government, we saw a failure to tackle deep-rooted skills mismatches, a stubbornly high proportion of working-age people lacking essential skills and a severe shortage of higher technical training. As a result, our workforce struggled to meet the demands of a technology-driven economy, while employers faced persistent skills shortages.

This Bill is different. It abolishes the outdated Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education and transfers its functions to Skills England. This is a monumental shift that creates a unified, agile and responsive skills system. Can the Minister assure us that the Bill will underpin what good government is about—listening to the needs of businesses, workers and learners; that it will allow more people, young and old, to earn while they learn and develop skills that will serve them well for life; and that by improving access to these opportunities up and down the country, we will drive growth, reduce youth unemployment and improve life chances for so many people?

Antonia Bance (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): My hon. Friend is eloquent in setting out the skills challenges of the Black Country. My constituency neighbours hers, and locally 40% of jobs need level 4 skills, but only 16% of people have those skills. That is the challenge we face locally. Does she agree that Skills England should be set up and based in an area of the country that desperately needs a skills upgrade, such as the Black Country?

Mrs Brackenridge: I absolutely welcome that intervention and support it wholeheartedly. Communities such as ours have felt and seen the decline, and the Government

are laser focused on reversing that to unlock talent and opportunities, and to give our residents a better chance to get their futures back.

In the past few weeks I have been honoured to meet many impressive apprentices, from those at Wolverhampton Homes, who are ensuring that residents' council housing is safe and well maintained, to Evie and Jake at Collins Aerospace, who are working on the future of flight and defence, as well as apprentices from Jaguar Land Rover, Halfords, BMW, Enterprise Mobility and Caterpillar. We have seen the consequences of a fragmented, outdated skills system, but with the Bill we now have a bold new direction that will empower workers, support businesses and drive economic growth across our country. The Bill will support apprenticeships now and into the future, and I urge the House to support it.

6.21 pm

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in support of the Bill, unamended, which I believe is crucial to delivering growth and ensuring that we have a highly trained workforce that is fit for the future. As some in the Chamber will know, my job before coming to this place was teaching degree-level apprenticeships in electro-mechanical engineering. I saw at first hand the transformative power of apprenticeships in delivering high quality education while providing real world experience.

Like all apprenticeships, degree-level apprenticeships are a tripartite partnership between apprentice, university and employer—a model that has proved highly effective. Our employers frequently reported back to us that apprentices were better prepared for their professional roles than their counterparts with traditional degrees, and degree-level apprenticeship programmes have widened participation, attracting more students from deprived backgrounds, and more students with learning differences who may have struggled within the traditional university system.

As a Member of Parliament, I weave my background in education, advanced manufacturing, and apprenticeships into everything I do in this role. I recently visited WEBS Furniture Training, which trains apprentices in bespoke furniture manufacturing—a proper, old-school, artisan skill that they can carry with them and make a career from all their lives. Long Eaton and Ilkeston, the principal towns in my constituency, have a long and proud history of furniture manufacturing and lace making respectively. Both towns are what they are today firmly as products of the industrial revolution, and although the economy has changed since the Victorian era, bespoke furniture manufacturing, done by highly skilled, irreplaceable artisans, survives.

IKEA, robots, and giant factories in China cannot replicate the product of the honed, learned artistry that remains the backbone of our British manufacturing, and to survive now in this changing world, those are the kinds of skills that Britain must foster. Such skills are also an incredible means of spurring economic growth and resilience outside London and the greater south-east, and indeed outside the great cities of the north and midlands. Ilkeston and Long Eaton are post-industrial towns in the east midlands, and if we get this right, we can protect and enhance their world-beating lace making and furniture manufacturing industries long into the future.

If we are to build the 1.5 million homes that the Government have promised in the next five years, and hopefully many more long after that, and if we are to build the new towns, railway lines, reservoirs, prisons—all the things that this country has failed to invest in for so long—we will need the electricians, carpenters, joiners, builders, welders and plumbers that apprenticeship providers are training across our country.

I would like to present a case study about my good friend and colleague, Councillor Harry Atkinson. Harry was one of the many new young councillors elected in Erewash when Labour took control of the borough council in 2023. Next year, he will be Erewash's youngest ever mayor, aged 25. Harry is also a highly skilled engineer. Leaving school at a time when about half of his cohort were going to university, Harry instead got an apprenticeship at Ratcliffe-on-Soar power station, which looms across the skyline of my constituency. Until last autumn, it was the last operational coal-fired power station in Britain. Harry has worked at Ratcliffe for nearly a decade. He has become so skilled that he has been promoted to managerial level and he is now a key trouble-shooter when things go wrong. While Ratcliffe is now in its decommissioning phase, Harry can be assured in his future because there is ample demand for the skills he learned in his apprenticeship, both locally and across the country.

Harry's story represents the power of an apprenticeship—the conversion of hard work into real skills, an assured career and good pay. It is those kinds of jobs that we need to create for our young people. It is on us—this Government—to build a future where this kind of apprenticeship success story is the norm, not the exception, and where an apprenticeship holds every bit as much value as a degree, is every bit as desirable for children and parents, and is every bit as much a cornerstone of our growing economy.

6.25 pm

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Bill. It clearly demonstrates the Government's ambitious commitment to training and apprenticeships. I will concentrate on the role that Skills England will play in aligning apprenticeship opportunities with the needs of local economies.

Scarborough and Whitby are beautiful places to live and to visit, but the levels of low-paid employment are not so appealing. According to the latest ONS figures, 26% of all jobs in my constituency were paid below the real living wage. On closer examination, the figures are even more alarming. For example, some 52% of part-time jobs done by women in my constituency were paid below the real living wage, while that figure for England was 32% and for Yorkshire and Humber it was 35%. The disparity between the figures for Scarborough and Whitby and the surrounding region should give us pause when we refer to local economies, because coastal communities can differ markedly from their hinterland.

Skills England's work in assessing local needs and opportunities must anticipate what those needs and opportunities may be in future, as well as now. Well-paid jobs and careers are the goal for young people in my constituency. It is a crucial time for the green transition that we need to reach net zero and to create the urgently needed skilled jobs in the renewables sector. Scarborough is one of closest harbours to the offshore wind farm

sites in the North sea, especially Hornsea Four, making it a prime location for the transportation of equipment and personnel, as well as for service vessels.

The Government rightly see the potential of the creative industries to create growth, but we know that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds or those who do not live in metropolitan areas are often denied such opportunities. In the past year, the Stephen Joseph Theatre in Scarborough has created two full-time trainee posts, with partners at Coventry University. It will deliver a degree course in acting and has a programme for young people pursuing a career in the performing arts. I want us to build on that to provide far more opportunities for talented young people in Scarborough and Whitby to train locally in the creative industries, especially to bridge the skills gap in practical trades, such as lighting, sound and camera operation.

As in so many areas, construction trainees are urgently needed now, and will be in the future. I am excited by the Government's support for a new development planned south of Scarborough, in Cayton, that will start as soon as possible and provide 2,500 new homes. The people building those homes and that infrastructure should be trained locally as far as possible.

I am pleased to tell the House that the construction skills village in Scarborough is already doing an incredible job of providing training for construction apprentices. It currently has 140 apprentices on its books, providing training in plastering, carpentry, bricklaying and electrical work. It has also just run its first solar panel installation course. Some 60% of its learners come from an area that is among the most deprived in the country, and a high number have additional educational needs, yet the record of its apprentices exceeds national outcomes. I ask the Minister to confirm that existing centres of excellence can be funded to provide more of what they already do so well.

In conclusion, I look forward to a future in which organisations such as the construction skills village are part of the Government's plan to boost apprenticeships and build a better kind of local economy.

6.30 pm

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): I welcome the introduction of this Bill as a clear indication that we are giving apprenticeships the support and recognition they deserve. I started my professional career at a training and enterprise council—a TEC—and, once upon a time, I used to sign off training contracts for apprenticeships. It was always a pleasure to speak to young people at the start of their future, so I know at first hand how needed the Bill is for the FE sector, employers and young people, and it is incredibly exciting to have this back on the agenda.

For the last 14 years, there has simply been no strategic direction. The partnership between Jobcentre Plus, FE colleges, employers and the workforce has been slowly eroded, and it is clear that we need a reset. The one in eight young people currently not in training, education or employment need that reset, and apprenticeships are a part of that agenda. This Bill paves the way for the establishment of Skills England, giving it the tools to perform its new role and delivering on our commitment to assess and address the existing skills gap and identify where training can be utilised for new growth.

[Amanda Hack]

Since the apprenticeship levy was first introduced by the Conservatives in 2017, we have had a decline in the growth of training in all areas where we actually need it. The new growth and skills levy being introduced will replace the old system and include a new foundation apprenticeship that gives young people a route to careers in critical sectors, enabling them to earn a wage while developing their skills. It will also allow funding for shorter apprenticeships, giving learners and employers greater flexibility over their training than under the existing system. I have honestly lost count of the amount of employers who have asked for changes to the apprenticeship levy, and, under Labour, we will deliver.

We are clear about our strategy and that it must be cross-departmental. We are already opening homebuilding skills hubs to deliver fast-track training to apprentices so that we can meet our target of 1.5 million new homes being built. It is clear that Labour has done this before, and we will do it again. More than two decades ago, the regional development agencies understood the challenges in their regions and funded training for sectors where there were skills shortages. I was proud of the very small role I played in setting up a construction academy and providing a boost to HGV driver training in partnership with leaders in FE, the private sector and local authorities, all funded by the East Midlands Development Agency.

Stephenson College in my constituency is a key organisation locally that serves my community. It has a strong role as an anchor organisation, and we should not forget that. It has fantastic facilities for learning and has created an environment for young people to grow and thrive, but it has not been easy. Like so many FE colleges, it has been put under huge financial pressure in recent years. We have to ensure that our colleges are financially sustainable in the long term, and I welcome the recent additional funding for the sector while recognising that there is so much more to do.

There is also a role for Skills England to support constituencies in areas that do not yet have devolved powers. My constituency of North West Leicestershire does not have a devolution deal, but we have just as much potential to grow as everywhere else, and key engagement with local authorities, the chambers of commerce and local employers, as well as the FE and HE sector, will be key in delivering that growth.

Within our approach, we must ensure that we are putting a lot of thought into how regions can work together, so that if we move across boundary lines, we are still met with the same funding and unconditional support. We will drive that ambition as a Government to meet our targets—to go bigger and better than before, ensuring that our legislation has the greatest impact possible. I look forward to the continued conversations on the shaping of Skills England, enabling our young people to develop the skills they need for the future.

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

6.34 pm

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): I start by paying tribute to the work of Mr Speaker and the Deputy Speakers in driving up the number of

apprenticeships in this House. Not only is that creating brilliant opportunities, but it is setting a brilliant example, so I pay tribute to them for the work they are doing.

We have heard some brilliant speeches today, and not just from right hon. and hon. Friends on the Conservative Benches. We have heard really important questions from the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes); from the chair of the APPG, the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr Perkins); and from the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Maya Ellis). We also heard a great speech from the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom). We do not always agree with the Liberal Democrats about everything, but a strength of the liberal tradition is suspicion of centralisation, which is what is in front of us today.

We have three main concerns about this Bill. First, there were good reasons why standard setting was put at arm's length and closer to employers. As we have heard from Members across this House and in the Lords, this is centralisation, and alongside the other changes that the Government are making, it will risk directly damaging the status of these qualifications.

Secondly, the Government are doing several things that will make it less likely that businesses will take on apprentices, but rather than fixing those problems, the Government are reorganising. Skills England will be the 13th skills body in 50 years—it is yet more reorganisation, rather than a focus on the real issues, and from the Secretary of State's comments earlier, it sounded as if there might be a further reorganisation later to boot.

Thirdly, we have real concerns that this reorganisation of the machinery of Government will lead to harmful delays in addressing some of the most important strategic issues that we face. Those concerns are borne out by the Government's own impact assessment. As with the schools Bill, this Bill is highly centralising and does not address the real issues. There are multiple things in the skills system that we need to address, but I am slightly baffled as to why the Government are starting by creating a new agency within the DFE and abolishing IfATE.

It is worth explaining how we got to IfATE in the first place. For decades, people said that they wanted to make apprenticeships more prestigious, and part of the answer was growing higher apprenticeships. The number of people on higher apprenticeships went up from just over 3,000 in 2010 to over 273,000 last year—a huge increase—and the hon. Member for Erewash (Adam Thompson) was absolutely right to talk about how good those degree apprenticeships are. They are great routes into good jobs. Indeed, the latest data shows that the median first degree graduate earned £29,900 five years after graduation, whereas a level 4 apprentice earned more—£33,800 on average.

As well as creating and boosting those higher apprenticeships, the other big change was a shift from a frameworks-based approach to a standards-based approach, and those standards meant a shift to a higher quality. They were led by employers, they had a longer duration—at least a year—and they had more off-the-job training and rigorous final assessments. That was much needed. In 2015, an Ofsted report found that even though some apprentices had been on the job for more than a year, they were not even aware that they were on an apprenticeship, such was the problem of quality. Things were being

funded that did not ultimately benefit young people, but did allow employers to pay a lower wage, which was obviously concerning.

The apprenticeship levy was designed to give employers much more ownership of the skills system, and making IfATE independent of Government was a big part of that, creating a properly employer-led system. I pay tribute to the work of IfATE—the Secretary of State did not thank it for its work, but I will do so. IfATE has created and maintained around 690 apprenticeships, supporting around 750,000 people on apprenticeships last year. It created 21 T-levels and 174 higher technical qualifications and enabled employer leaders to set a strategic direction for schools in their sector, and its website is an amazing resource.

However, we now see the Government completely reversing the direction of policy. While we lengthened apprenticeships, they have cut the length of an apprenticeship to eight months. While we grew higher apprenticeships, they are abolishing most level 7 apprenticeships, and by abolishing IfATE and bringing it in-house at the DFE, they are eroding independence and employer ownership. Why are the Government suddenly moving in a reverse direction?

Peter Swallow: Does the hon. Gentleman not see that the Government are doing so because this is precisely what businesses are calling for?

Neil O'Brien: I will come on to what businesses are saying in one second. The Government are doing two things that are going to be very bad for apprenticeship numbers. First, while apprentices are exempt from national insurance, the Budget—particularly its £25 billion increase in national insurance contributions—is cutting hiring and leading to job losses across the board. What employer groups are saying about that is pretty damning; be it the Institute of Directors, the Federation of Small Businesses or the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, they are warning of serious job losses as a result of the Budget. That tax increase, and the damage it is doing, is focused on exactly the type of jobs that apprentices might traditionally get, so apprenticeships are being hit by the backwash from the Budget.

Secondly, the Government are planning to move funding from apprenticeships to other areas. In opposition, Labour talked about allowing employers to spend 50% of their apprenticeship levy funds on other things. As the election drew nearer, that commitment seemed to be disappearing. On 20 November, the Minister said that the commitment to 15% was “currently being reviewed”, but just weeks later, on 9 December, the Secretary of State said that the Government were still committed to “50% flexibility for employers”. It would be interesting to hear from Ministers whether that 50% still stands now.

Given that the levy funds £2.5 billion of spending, 50% is a lot of money to potentially move out of apprenticeships. We can argue about whether that is desirable, but all things being equal, it will certainly cut funding for apprenticeships. We might also be wary that it will undercut the purposes of the levy and have high dead-weight. In fact, the Institute for Fiscal Studies has pointed out:

“In principle, this could help employers to pay for other forms of training that they and their employees would find valuable. But the history of these wider training subsidies, such as the former Train to Gain programme”—

a programme under the last Labour Government—

“suggests that the result is often that much of the spending goes on training that firms would have provided—and paid for—even without the subsidy.”

The apprenticeship levy, whatever its flaws, did at least attempt to address this problem of dead-weight and discouraged freeriding by large firms, so that firms that invested in their workers did not lose out to those that did not. Since the levy was introduced in 2017, real-terms spending on apprenticeships and work-based training has increased in real terms by about a quarter, from £2 billion to £2.5 billion.

In a written answer to me, Ministers have confirmed that the Department has a forecast for the number of apprenticeship starts, but they have also said that they will not publish it. If it was published, it would surely show that removing possibly half of the funding would lead to a substantial drop in the number of apprenticeships. Perhaps that is why we are not allowed to see it. Those same reasons are why the Government are going back to shorter apprenticeships and away from the higher level, reducing quality and cutting length to try to offset the hit to numbers from other Government policies.

There are bits of this agenda where we share the same goals. We all want to see more SMEs offering apprenticeships and more young people getting apprenticeships. Although on average twice as many people started apprenticeships each year under the last Government as under the previous Labour Government, we still wanted that to be much higher. Although we are interested in the same questions, we have quite different ideas for how we address them. Part of the Government's answer is to abolish the highest level of apprenticeships in order to redistribute the money.

The level 7 apprenticeships that the Government are axing currently account for just 9% of apprenticeship spending, but a lot of good things will potentially be lost by abolishing them. I have been contacted by firms worried about the abolition of the solicitors apprenticeship, which is a great way into the law for people from less privileged backgrounds. One firm worried about that is Bolt Burdon Kemp, which told me:

“This will really impact social mobility into sectors like law, accountancy, and consulting. The traditional route into law is expensive and therefore without the apprenticeship scheme many would not be able to afford to do so. We also believe it will have a wider detrimental impact on the reputation of apprenticeships.”

It has taken such a lot of effort to get that route going, and it would be a huge shame to lose it.

Likewise, level 7 apprenticeships are opening up great jobs and leadership roles in the public sector, too. Some 56,000 people started apprenticeships in the public sector last year. More than half of management apprenticeships at level 7 are in health and education. In fact, they were identified as having a key role in the NHS's own long-term workforce plan. Public services will lose out, as will ambitious apprentices.

Because level 7 apprenticeships are a small part of funding, I am worried that the Government will now go after level 6 apprenticeships, which is a much bigger share of spending. A lot of employers are worried about that, too. *[Interruption.]* The Secretary of State sighs as I say that. Presumably when the Minister gets to her feet, she will promise that they will not do to level 6 what they

[Neil O'Brien]

will do to level 7. It sounds like Ministers will be clear when they stand up, will they not, that they definitely will not do that to level 6 apprenticeships.

The last Government moved to make it more attractive for SMEs to take on younger people. From April, 16 to 21-year-olds have had 100% funding, rather than requiring the 5% employer contribution. We need to build on that by cutting bureaucracy and making it easier and more attractive to take on young people. Building on that would be more sensible than reorganisation, centralisation and the defunding of higher apprenticeships. This Bill abolishes IfATE and gives the Secretary of State significant powers as a result, but it says nothing at all about the new body, Skills England, which is intended to be at the centre of the skills landscape under this Government. That has been a pretty unwelcome surprise to some in industry.

In its briefing on the Bill, the Construction Industry Training Board noted that this was

“contrary to the previous characterisation of Skills England that was outlined in the...King’s Speech...and contrary to the vision for Skills England to be an independent body, established in law, with a cross-governmental role”.

The CITB makes an important point. IfATE existed to serve all employers—public and private—and across every Department. In contrast, Skills England will be a part of the DfE. The CEO of Skills England will be a job share between two civil servants who are currently running post-16 skills at the Department. I am told by former Ministers that they are good officials, but this is a recentralisation into the Department—as was pointed out by both the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood), and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire.

Luke Murphy: May I ask the hon. Gentleman a question that I asked some of his colleagues earlier? In 2011 the last Government set up the Standards and Testing Agency, whose predecessor was a non-departmental public body that became an Executive agency, like IfATE. It sets statutory assessments for school pupils and develops professional skills tests for trainee teachers. The last Government did something very similar to this. Why was it okay then, but is not okay now?

Neil O'Brien: That is an important question. The hon. Gentleman is tempting me to go into the history of apprenticeship regulation in England, which dates back to 1536. I will not detain the House with all the details, but suffice it to say that that was a move from one arms-length body to another, so it was different from this. None the less, IfATE was better than either of those things, which is why we ended up there.

The very act of a further reorganisation is likely to compound the effects of the Budget and the decision to move apprenticeships money into other projects. Indeed, according to the Government’s own impact assessment, there may be a drop in apprenticeship starts while IfATE’s functions are transferred to the Secretary of State. It says:

“The transfer of function from IfATE to the DfE could potentially cause a temporary slowdown in the growth rate of new apprenticeships and technical education courses due to potential delays in the approvals process resulting from the bill.”

It also says:

“This may disproportionately impact disadvantaged learners, who rely more heavily on these pathways for career advancement.”

So there you have it, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Government are moving money out of apprenticeships, and the Budget will also hit numbers, but instead of focused action to boost numbers for young people, the Government’s response has been to reduce quality, cut length and axe level 7 apprenticeships to try to prop up overall numbers. Now we have yet another reorganisation—one that takes us away from an independent, employer-led system, and one that will risk, in the Government’s own words, cutting apprenticeship numbers and hitting the most disadvantaged. Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear.

6.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): It is a pleasure to close the debate. I am grateful for the contributions of Members on both sides of the House; we have heard some excellent speeches. I welcome the points and questions that have been raised, and I will go through as many as time allows.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said in her opening speech, skills are essential to our missions to drive economic growth and create opportunity. To achieve that, we need a skills system that is fit for the future. In every region, it should provide training options that lead to skilled work and give businesses the skilled workers whom they need in order to grow. I was pleased to hear from Members about the apprenticeships and vocational courses in their constituencies which have led to jobs, but most Members have also referred to significant challenges in our skills system.

Acute skills shortages are a particular issue in some areas. Skills supply does not match demand, and there is not enough business investment in skills. That, however, is what this Government inherited from the previous Conservative Government. We urgently need larger volumes of higher-quality training that meets employer needs, particularly in key sectors. For example, as we have already heard, there is an urgent need to build more homes, but a third of construction employers report finding suitable skilled staff a key challenge.

My hon. Friend the Member for Tipton and Wednesbury (Antonia Bance) mentioned levels 4 and 5 qualifications. In the UK, about 10% of adults hold them as their highest qualifications, as opposed to—shockingly—20% in Germany and 34% in Canada. We must, and this Government will, do better. Skills England, which has been delivering in shadow form since last year, is our new national body for meeting skills needs. It will simplify the skills system now and in the future, combining new functions with improvements in existing ones, within one dynamic body. In its first report, “Driving growth, widening opportunities”, Skills England highlighted the critical skills gaps that currently face the country. Across the UK, more than 2.5 million roles—almost one in 10—are in critical demand. The last Conservative Government seemed content with this, but putting it simply, this Government are not. As my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Luke Murphy) stated so well, this is about what the Bill will achieve for everyone: it is about growth.

Skills England’s initial assessment of the skills challenges in the economy, together with the “Invest 2035” Green Paper published last year and ahead of the forthcoming

industrial strategy, set out how the in-demand occupations of today are also expected to grow in the future. As noted by the Secretary of State, these growth-driving sectors include the life sciences, clean energy, digital and technology, and creative industries. By addressing our skills needs, the UK has a real chance of being a world leader in these fields, but we must do this now: we must not delay. We must build a skills system that looks ahead, and we must anticipate for the future. As was put so eloquently by my hon. Friends the Members for Rochester and Strood (Lauren Edwards) and for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume), Skills England will enable employers to fill our current skills gaps and the likely ones of the future. Excellently, they recognise the need to anticipate our future skills needs.

To respond directly to the points raised by the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) and the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom), users of apprenticeships, employers, providers and assessment organisations regularly complain about the time it takes to update standards and assessment plans. It will remain the default position that a group of people will prepare standards and assessment plans, but removing the requirement to use a group to prepare standards in every instance will speed up the process and reduce administrative burdens. In line with IfATE's current processes, all new standards and those that have undergone significant revision following review will, prior to being approved, be published online to give interested parties an opportunity to comment. It will only be in the minority of cases where simple and straightforward changes are proposed that these will not be published online for comment prior to approval. However, there will still be mechanisms for users of the system to challenge where a standard or assessment plan is not working in practice and needs revising.

Sir John Hayes: I appreciate what the hon. Lady is saying about that, but will she in quick order set out how that will be directed either by the Secretary of State or by Skills England? We need to know not just the detail at the point of publication, but the structural needs in advance of that, so how will that be set out? Will it be set out in guidance—statutory guidance perhaps?

Janet Daby: The right hon. Member is absolutely right that these things need to be set out, and they will be set out. This Bill is about transferring the role of IfATE to the Secretary of State and enabling the delivery of Skills England.

Skills England will work with key partners, including employers, training providers, mayoral strategic authorities and unions to form a national picture of where skills gaps exist and how they can be addressed. It will ensure employers have the skills they need to drive economic growth while creating opportunities across the country and building a highly skilled workforce.

During this debate, I have heard Members question the need to close IfATE and establish Skills England. This Government have committed to delivering for the skills sector, and we are listening to the needs of employers. This can be seen in our reformed growth and skills offer, but we must go further to address the fragmentation of our skills system so that we can close the most persistent skills gaps. The Bill paves the way for the full establishment of Skills England by enabling the new body to take

on and build out from IfATE's work to shape apprenticeships and technical qualifications to meet the needs of employers and the economy as a whole.

The scale and urgency of the skills challenge that we face means we are setting Skills England up to have a broader strategic purpose than IfATE, including but stretching beyond the work previously undertaken by IfATE. Skills England will, for instance, provide an ongoing authoritative assessment of local, regional and national skills needs, which is absolutely needed. It will combine the best statistical data with insights from employers and other key stakeholders, and will use these insights to ensure the design of technical education and apprenticeships reflects the skill needs that have been identified, so that we can truly build a workforce fit for the future.

Labour markets and the skills required to increase productivity and economic growth vary considerably by region, and we have already heard from many Members about the different skills that are needed in their regions. Skills England will therefore also have a strong regional footprint, working closely with local skills systems so that they can tap into the comprehensive suite of training offers that it will build across the country. Skills England will also ensure that skills sit at the heart of joined-up decision making across Government. It will work closely with the Industrial Strategy Council, so that we have the skilled workforce needed to deliver a clear, long-term plan for the future economy, and with the Migration Advisory Committee, because growing the domestic skills pipeline will reduce our reliance on overseas workers.

While Skills England will have a broad and ambitious strategic agreement, it will not be able to deliver the scale of change that we need without its taking on IfATE's important work, so the transfer of functions through the Bill is vital. The Bill does not, however, simply aim to transfer functions. It also includes a number of targeted changes intended to allow the system for designing and approving technical qualifications and apprenticeships to become more agile and responsive; we have been listening to employers, who have told us this is crucial if we are to work together to plug the skills gaps at the pace required. The Bill will provide greater flexibility when designing standards and apprenticeships plans and make processes easier to engage with, allowing experts to invest their time and expertise at the right point.

There is so much I would like to say in response to the many points that Members have made, and I apologise now for not being able to respond to the many excellent points and comments. However, there are a few very pivotal points that I do need to mention.

The Bill was amended in the House of Lords to delay its commencement by a year. It is disappointing that peers voted for a delay to the full establishment of Skills England, despite many Members of the other place supporting its aims. This Government are clear that employers need a fully functional Skills England now—as I have said, they cannot wait. The skills gaps in our economy are holding back growth and opportunity, and we need this Bill to give Skills England the key tools to tackle those gaps without delay. I cannot say that enough.

Skills England is in shadow form, and has already engaged widely, with more than 700 different partners representing thousands of individual organisations through roundtables, cross-section webinars and network events,

[Janet Daby]

including the Confederation of British Industry, the Federation of Small Businesses and the Institute of Directors, as well as a range of employers and representative bodies from priority sectors, including digital, life sciences, green, construction and healthcare, and we will continue to listen to the voices of experts to shape what we do.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 70, Noes 312.

Division No. 105]

[6.58 pm

AYES

Adam, Shockat	MacCleary, James
Allister, Jim	MacDonald, Mr Angus
Amos, Gideon	Maguire, Ben
Anderson, Lee	Maguire, Helen
Aquarone, Steff	Martin, Mike
Babarinde, Josh	Maynard, Charlie
Bennett, Alison	van Mierlo, Freddie
Brewer, Alex	Miller, Calum
Brown-Fuller, Jess	Mohamed, Iqbal
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Moran, Layla
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Morgan, Helen
Chadwick, David	Morrison, Mr Tom (<i>Proxy vote</i> <i>cast by Dr Chambers</i>)
Chamberlain, Wendy	Munt, Tessa
Chambers, Dr Danny	Olney, Sarah
Collins, Victoria	Perteghella, Manuela
Cooper, Daisy	Pinkerton, Dr Al
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Dance, Adam	Robinson, rh Gavin
Dean, Bobby	Roome, Ian
Easton, Alex	Sabine, Anna
Farron, Tim	Savage, Dr Roz
George, Andrew	Shannon, Jim
Gibson, Sarah (<i>Proxy vote</i> <i>cast by Anna Sabine</i>)	Slade, Vikki
Gilmour, Rachel	Smart, Lisa
Glover, Olly	Sollom, Ian
Goldman, Marie	Stone, Jamie
Gordon, Tom	Taylor, Luke
Green, Sarah	Tice, Richard
Harding, Monica	Voaden, Caroline
Heylings, Pippa	Wilkinson, Max
Hussain, Mr Adnan	Wilson, Munira
Jardine, Christine	Wilson, rh Sammy
Jarvis, Liz	Young, Claire
Jones, Clive	
Khan, Ayoub	
Kohler, Mr Paul	
Lockhart, Carla	

Tellers for the Ayes:

Susan Murray and
Zöe Franklin

NOES

Abbott, Jack	Atkinson, Catherine
Abrahams, Debbie	Atkinson, Lewis
Ahmed, Dr Zubir	Bailey, Mr Calvin
Alaba, Mr Bayo	Bailey, Olivia
Aldridge, Dan	Baines, David
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas	Baker, Richard
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Bance, Antonia
Ali, Rushanara	Barker, Paula
Ali, Tahir	Barron, Lee
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Anderson, Callum	Beales, Danny
Anderson, Fleur	Beavers, Lorraine
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Begum, Apsana (<i>Proxy vote</i> <i>cast by Zarah Sultana</i>)
Asato, Jess	Bell, Torsten
Asser, James	Benn, rh Hilary
Athwal, Jas	

Berry, Siân	Fookes, Catherine
Blake, Olivia (<i>Proxy vote cast</i> <i>by Chris Elmore</i>)	Foster, Mr Paul
Blake, Rachel	Foxcroft, Vicky
Bloore, Chris	Foy, Mary Kelly
Blundell, Mrs Elsie (<i>Proxy vote</i> <i>cast by Chris Elmore</i>)	Francis, Daniel
Bonavia, Kevin	Frith, Mr James
Botterill, Jade	Gardiner, Barry
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena	Gardner, Dr Allison
Bryant, Chris	Gelder, Anna
Buckley, Julia	Gemmell, Alan
Burgon, Richard	German, Gill
Burke, Maureen	Gilbert, Tracy
Butler, Dawn	Gill, Preet Kaur
Byrne, Ian	Gittins, Becky
Byrne, rh Liam	Glindon, Mary
Cadbury, Ruth	Gosling, Jodie
Caliskan, Nesil	Grady, John
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Hack, Amanda
Campbell, Irene	Haigh, rh Louise
Campbell, Juliet	Hamilton, Fabian
Campbell-Savours, Markus	Hamilton, Paulette
Carling, Sam	Hardy, Emma
Charalambous, Bambos	Harris, Carolyn
Chowns, Ellie	Hatton, Lloyd
Clark, Feryal	Hayes, Helen
Coleman, Ben	Hayes, Tom
Collier, Jacob	Hazelgrove, Claire
Collinge, Lizzi	Healey, rh John
Collins, Tom	Hillier, Dame Meg
Conlon, Liam	Hinchliff, Chris
Coombes, Sarah	Hinder, Jonathan
Cooper, Andrew	Hopkins, Rachel
Cooper, Dr Beccy	Hughes, Claire
Costigan, Deirdre	Hume, Alison
Cox, Pam	Huq, Dr Rupa
Coyle, Neil	Hurley, Patrick
Creasy, Ms Stella	Hussain, Imran
Crichton, Torcuil	Ingham, Leigh
Daby, Janet	Irons, Natasha
Dakin, Sir Nicholas	Jameson, Sally
Dalton, Ashley	Jermy, Terry
Darlington, Emily	Jogee, Adam
Davies, Jonathan	Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Davies, Paul	Johnson, Kim
Davies, Shaun	Jones, Gerald
Dean, Josh	Jones, Lillian
Dearden, Kate	Jones, Louise
Denyer, Carla	Jones, Ruth
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Josan, Gurinder Singh
Dickson, Jim	Joseph, Sojan
Dixon, Samantha	Juss, Warinder
Dodds, rh Anneliese	Kane, Mike
Dollimore, Helena	Kaur, Satvir (<i>Proxy vote cast</i> <i>by Chris Elmore</i>)
Dowd, Peter	Kendall, rh Liz
Duffield, Rosie	Khan, Afzal
Duncan-Jordan, Neil	Khan, Naushabah
Eagle, Dame Angela	Kinnock, Stephen
Eagle, rh Maria	Kirkham, Jayne
Edwards, Lauren	Kumar, Sonia
Edwards, Sarah	Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Efford, Clive	Lavery, Ian
Ellis, Maya	Leadbeater, Kim
Elmore, Chris	Leishman, Brian
Entwistle, Kirith	Lewin, Andrew
Evans, Chris	Lewis, Clive
Falconer, Mr Hamish	Lightwood, Simon
Farnsworth, Linsey	Long Bailey, Rebecca
Fenton-Glynn, Josh	MacAlister, Josh
Ferguson, Mark	Macdonald, Alice
Ferguson, Patricia	MacNae, Andy
	Martin, Amanda

Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McEvoy, Lola
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moon, Perran
 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
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote
 cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reid, Joani
 Rhodes, Martin
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave

Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scrogg, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Swann, Robin
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Toale, Jessica
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 Western, Andrew
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Martin McCluskey and
Gen Kitchen

Question accordingly negated.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 62(2)),
 That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 317, Noes 55.

Division No. 106]

[7.12 pm

AYES

Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Allister, Jim
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baines, David
 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
 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
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carling, Sam
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Chowns, Ellie
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Dowd, Peter
 Duffield, Rosie
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Easton, Alex
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Evans, Chris
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 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
 Grady, John
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma

Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Healey, rh John
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Louise
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Lockhart, Carla
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McEvoy, Lola
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moon, Perran
 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
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reid, Joani
 Rhodes, Martin
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scroggham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shannon, Jim
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaught, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin

Snell, Gareth
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Swann, Robin
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl

Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 Western, Andrew
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Martin McCluskey and
Gen Kitchen

NOES

Amos, Gideon
 Aquarone, Steff
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bennett, Alison
 Brewer, Alex
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Chadwick, David
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Dance, Adam
 Dean, Bobby
 Farron, Tim
 George, Andrew
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
 Gilmour, Rachel
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Green, Sarah
 Harding, Monica
 Heylings, Pippa
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jones, Clive
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 MacCleary, James
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Ben

Maguire, Helen
 Martin, Mike
 Maynard, Charlie
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Miller, Calum
 Moran, Layla
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrison, Mr Tom (*Proxy vote cast by Dr Chambers*)
 Munt, Tessa
 Olney, Sarah
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Roome, Ian
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Sollom, Ian
 Stone, Jamie
 Taylor, Luke
 Voaden, Caroline
 Wilkinson, Max
 Wilson, Munira
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
Susan Murray and
Zöe Franklin

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read a Second time.

INSTITUTE FOR APPRENTICESHIPS AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION (TRANSFER OF FUNCTIONS ETC) BILL [LORDS]: PROGRAMME

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (Transfer of Functions etc) Bill [*Lords*]:

Committal

- (1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

- (2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 20 March 2025.

- (3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Consideration and Third Reading

- (4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

- (5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

- (6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

Other proceedings

- (7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(*Jeff Smith.*)

Question agreed to.

INSTITUTE FOR APPRENTICESHIPS AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION (TRANSFER OF FUNCTIONS ETC) BILL [*LORDS*]: MONEY

King's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (Transfer of Functions etc) Bill [*Lords*], it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State.—(*Jeff Smith.*)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

EDUCATION

That the draft Higher Education (Fee Limits and Fee Limit Condition) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2025, which were laid before this House on 20 January, be approved.—(*Jeff Smith.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Kendal Post Office

7.25 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I rise to present a petition on behalf of 2,830 of my constituents in Kendal and the surrounding communities in favour of retaining and keeping alive the Kendal Crown post office on Stricklandgate in our town.

In 2019, we successfully ran a campaign to save the Kendal Crown post office and, as a community, we are determined to do so again. The Crown post office serves our community wonderfully with fantastic staff, but more than that, it provides the home for the Royal Mail sorting office, and the postal workers there also do a wonderful job. To lose the Crown post office building could mean that we also lose the Royal Mail sorting office, and we are determined to stop that.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Westmorland and Lonsdale,

Declares that Kendal Post Office should not be included in the list of 115 directly operated post offices at risk of closure; further notes Kendal Post Office's role as a vital community service at the heart of Kendal; further declares that it should remain in its current position or should only be moved to suitable premises.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government and Post Office to reconsider and guarantee the future of Kendal Post Office.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P003046]

Doncaster Sheffield Airport

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

7.26 pm

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to make the case for the economic contribution of Doncaster Sheffield airport in the House. Its reopening is the No. 1 priority for the people of Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme, as well as residents right across our region.

Reopening our airport is not simply a matter of bringing jobs, though it will bring jobs. It is not just about the wider economy, though it will massively contribute to the economy. It is about our local pride, because our airport is our local pride. When DSA closed two years ago, our community was robbed of a key part of its history and identity. Seeing planes flying once again in the skies above Doncaster is my goal and the reason I address the House tonight.

I will use my time today to speak about the business case for reopening Doncaster Sheffield airport, the clear economic benefits and the importance of the Government's commitment to finally get this over the line. I will talk first about the inspiring local campaign that has kept DSA high on the agenda since the airport closed its doors 818 long days ago, and that has provided the momentum to get us to where we are today: on the brink of making the dream of reopening a reality.

This is not the first time I have raised Doncaster Sheffield airport in this place.

Mark Sewards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): No.

Lee Pitcher: No. Since being elected, I have asked many questions on the subject. I am sure that hon. Members across the House will be delighted to hear that this will not be the last time either. The fact is that it is important to so many constituents, and nothing demonstrates that better than the Save DSA campaign. I am proud to champion the campaign to save our airport in Parliament, and I hope my efforts in this place serve to highlight the wider efforts of local campaigners at home.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing the debate forward. I spoke to him beforehand, so he knows what I am going to say. Does he agree that Government funding for local industry means that a rising tide lifts all ships and that the support for the airport will have a great add-on benefit to the local economy? Does he further agree that support for all our airports through the reduction of air passenger duty for flights within the UK would greatly increase the economic benefits to airports and the constituencies around them, as well as bringing tourism benefits?

Lee Pitcher: I most certainly agree that the economic benefits of a regional airport opening are huge, not just for local jobs and the local economy but for the tourism trade, which is massively important right now.

When communities suffer the loss of major employers, as ours did, it is easy to slip into doom and gloom. Mark Chadwick—who I am pleased to say is here this

evening—and the rest of the Save DSA campaign team refused to sink into negativity. They knew that there was no good business case to close that airport. They knew that there was no good reason to abandon our community, rip out a part of our heritage and end those jobs. The Save DSA campaign and others have fought tirelessly since the airport's closure to keep it from becoming yet another example of regional decline. I thank them for their efforts and massively commend their work, as well as that of other groups, such as the Friends of DSA, a group of ex-employees and supporters whom I had the fortune of meeting recently. Their dedication shows that it was never just a job for them. I know they will be following progress closely.

Members who are unfamiliar with our airport may ask, "Why is this so important?" When Peel decided to close the airport in November 2022, it was not just a blow to passengers; it was the end of hundreds of good, well-paid jobs in Doncaster and the surrounding area.

Jo White (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. I have heard time and again from my constituents about their regret that they no longer have easy access to an airport on their doorstep. Not only was Doncaster airport important for passengers, but it was embedded in the business community in Bassetlaw. Its closure meant job losses and the loss of regular income streams for local businesses. Does he agree that reopening the airport will create new opportunities for residents in my constituency, including in the world-leading STEP—spherical tokamak for energy production—project, which will deliver international investment and high-skilled jobs to the surrounding area?

Lee Pitcher: Most certainly. I have already spoken with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) about the importance of a regional airport. My hon. Friend is quite right that it would make all the difference globally and internationally, particularly in Bassetlaw, where she lives.

Despite the best efforts of Doncaster Mayor Ros Jones, South Yorkshire Mayor Oliver Coppard and others, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Ed Miliband), the airport was closed. To say that was a bitter blow for our community is an understatement. The closure of our airport brought home the reality of the previous Government's levelling-up programme. It felt back then like there was no levelling up for the people of Doncaster. It was not just jobs that we lost; we lost local pride and a connection to our past. Doncaster Sheffield airport is, apart from anything else, a vital link to our community's aviation heritage.

Before it was the finest international airport in the country, DSA was RAF Finningley, with an aviation history dating back to 1915. During the first world war, planes from Finningley, flown by incredibly brave men, intercepted German zeppelins en route to Sheffield. During the second world war, Finningley served as a bomber base, and was once again at the forefront of protecting British lives and defending our democracy. When Julie Ann Gibson's plane landed at Finningley in 1991, she trailblazed her way into the history books: for the first time in its 73 years, the Air Force had a female pilot. That heritage remains evident at the site today thanks to the incredible work of the Vulcan to the Sky trust, which is committed to preserving and protecting

two of the most iconic aircraft in British history: the Avro Vulcan and the English Electric Canberra. When I visited the trust last year, I was inspired by its work not only to protect those incredible feats of British engineering, but to support and guide Britain's next generation of engineers through their work, including children and young people in my constituency—a link to our past; a promise for our future. I hope you can tell from my words, Madam Deputy Speaker, how intensely proud we are of our airport, and that you can hear why it is so important to my constituents.

Allow me to move on to the business case for reopening DSA. I have spent much of my time since becoming an MP talking to local business leaders, and I have lost count of the number of times I have been asked the same question: when is the airport reopening? Local businesses are as keen as anyone to see our airport reopen. They understand how strong the business case is. With renewed conversation nationally about airport capacity and the importance of bringing back growth, we need look no further than a regional airport practically ready to go.

A huge amount of work has been done in the background, led by Doncaster Mayor Ros Jones and her team, to make sure all the i's are dotted and the t's are crossed when it comes to demonstrating the viability of DSA. Ros knows better than anyone how vital it is to prove beyond doubt that reopening Doncaster Sheffield airport is not just good for local pride but a brilliant business decision.

An independent financial viability assessment has been clear: Doncaster Sheffield airport is absolutely a viable business prospect. The full business case projects more than 5,000 direct and 6,500 indirect jobs from a reopened DSA by 2050; £5 billion in gross value added to the economy; £2 billion in gross welfare benefits; and—the headline that really grabbed my attention—a projected benefit-cost ratio of 9:1. That means for every single pound put in, we get £9 in return. It is no wonder the business community is keen to see the airport back in action. Dan Fell, CEO of Doncaster chamber of commerce, has said:

“In addition to creating thousands of jobs, the airport will also act as a magnet for investment, help businesses trade internationally, further develop the region's capability as a nationally significant hub for freight and logistics, and support inbound tourism.”

Mark Swards: My hon. Friend is making a powerful case to underscore his claim to be called Mr Doncaster Airport. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Yorkshire and northern Lincolnshire, I support any move that leads to greater growth across our entire region. Does he agree that we need to not just seize opportunities such as this but accelerate the delivery of them, so that everyone in our region can feel the benefits of economic growth?

Lee Pitcher: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and for the work he does on the APPG to promote everything that is great and needed in Yorkshire. I could not agree more about the economic importance of this airport for us all.

This is not just an airport. This is not just Doncaster. A reopened DSA is also a reopened South Yorkshire, opening the door to inward investment from across the globe. Where once there were fighter planes, now there

will be freight planes. Doncaster sits at the heart of our great country. It is already one of our major transport hubs. With DSA open again, South Yorkshire will become home to new industry, cutting-edge renewable energy and technological innovation.

Sally Jameson (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): As well as the exciting prospect of planes taking off from Doncaster once again, does my hon. Friend agree that this is a significant opportunity to turn both Doncaster and South Yorkshire into a hub for sustainable aviation fuel, creating high-skill, high-wage jobs for our local economy in that industry, in line with the Government's growth agenda to ensure that economic prosperity is felt all over the country, including in areas such as Doncaster and South Yorkshire?

Lee Pitcher: I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for that intervention. I wholeheartedly agree about the importance of looking at sustainable aviation fuel and the opportunities it brings in terms of new jobs, aspiration and a future for our children and young adults in the area. People love to fly, and they will always fly. We need that to bring creativity back to our shores and learn from others, so it is massively important that we continue to promote technologies such as sustainable aviation fuel.

If we are looking for growth and reindustrialisation, and if we are looking to decentralise our economy away from London, where better to look than an airport that sits ready and waiting to serve? The promise of apprenticeships and high-paid, good jobs for our young people is another reason that our airport must reopen and one of my major priorities as an MP. Doncaster, like so many towns and cities in the north, has seen many of its brightest young people leave for prospects elsewhere. The promise of regional economic growth is a promise to our young people. It is a promise that says, “Yes, you can chase that brilliant, bright future, and you can chase it right here at home on your doorstep.”

Recently, I was lucky enough to meet the UK's youngest pilot trainer, and the world's youngest flight examiner, Kathan Dudhela. We spoke about Doncaster Sheffield airport, and he told me how excited he was that one day he might get to land on that historic runway. I left that conversation inspired by him, and determined to see Doncaster's young people follow in his great footsteps. I will continue to fight for the apprenticeships and training opportunities that must come alongside a reopened Doncaster Sheffield airport.

So much has been achieved in the last few months. A £20 million investment has been approved, combining funds from Doncaster city council and the South Yorkshire mayoral combined authority, which will go towards supporting the crucial early stage works that are required to mobilise and reopen the airport. An operator, Munich Airport International, has been announced, and before Christmas I was proud, along with many of my hon. Friends, to witness the first flight back since the closure, courtesy of 2Excel, which remained on the site all that time and never lost faith.

Do not get me wrong: things are looking great, but challenges remain. Important practical steps to make Doncaster Sheffield airport operational still need to be taken, and there are still hurdles to jump. However, none of the remaining challenges are impossible. All that is

[Lee Pitcher]

required now is the political will to seize this opportunity and get us over the line. Right now the stars are aligned. The finances are committed, the operator is secured, the Mayor, combined authority and regional MPs are all on the same page. We cannot allow this opportunity to slip through our fingers. This is a moment to show the world that Doncaster and South Yorkshire are once again open for business.

Jake Richards (Rother Valley) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a characteristically tub-thumping speech about this airport. My constituency, and Maltby in particular, has many people who worked at and used the airport. My hon. Friend spoke about the opportunities for people to remain at home and still get on in life, which really strikes a chord with me when I speak to young people in Maltby. Does he agree that the airport is not just about flights, but about offering young people a future to remain at home, and a bright future to stay in Maltby?

Lee Pitcher: Most certainly. Our young people have aspirations, but we need to provide jobs and opportunities for all. A reopened airport will provide those great opportunities for lots of different jobs, flights, potential future pilots, and superb jobs on the runway and the ground.

Will the Government make their commitment to a reopened Doncaster Sheffield airport clear? Will the Minister explain what concrete steps the Government will take to support the economic benefits of a reopened DSA, and will he commit tonight to supporting the full reopening of our airspace and to avoiding any further delays? We have seen the results across our great nation time and again, when vital regional infrastructure is not nurtured with the political will needed to sustain it. The desire for something different is a big part of the reason that the last election returned so many Labour MPs. Voters had had enough of regional decline, and enough of being told that this was the way it had to be. They wanted hope. This new Government promised to give them that hope, and they must now keep that promise.

My constituency office sits just across the road from the terminal building of Doncaster Sheffield airport. When I head into work, I look across the road and see a building that is beginning to wake back up after a fretful sleep. As Mark Chadwick told me, this transformative initiative is not just about securing a prosperous future for ourselves; it also paves the way for our children, and our children's children. The reopening of our airport stands as a beacon of hope, offering unparalleled prospects for the community now and for generations to come. I am ready, all of us in Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme are ready. South Yorkshire is ready, the region is ready, and we want to see those planes above Doncaster once again.

7.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Mike Kane): Shakespeare said:

"Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them."

I think it is all three in the case of my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher). As a Lancastrian, I am feeling rather

intimidated by the line-up of Members on the Benches behind me, but thank God I have the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on my side, even though he is sitting on the Opposition Benches.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme on securing this important debate about the economic contribution of Doncaster Sheffield airport. I also congratulate him on being appointed as Labour's utilities business champion. My hon. Friend has a great CV, from working his way up in the water industry to delivering logistics and infrastructure, so he knows what he is talking about when it comes to aviation infrastructure. He may be Mr Doncaster, but our hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster Central (Sally Jameson) is Mrs Doncaster. As the aviation Minister, I fear the Division Lobby some evenings, as I am rugby tackled day in, day out about getting Doncaster Sheffield airport reopened. My hon. Friends care about the future of the airport, their constituents and the wider South Yorkshire region.

I have listened very carefully to the considered comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme, and by all the Members who contributed, and I will try to address most of them, but first I want to say a few words about Doncaster Sheffield airport. I know there was deep disappointment in South Yorkshire and beyond when the previous owners decided to close the airport at the end of 2022. That marked the end of a 17-year operation as a commercial airport, but before that it had a long and illustrious history as RAF Finningley. My hon. Friend mentioned Jean Lennox Bird, the first female RAF pilot in the UK. As we approach International Women's Day, her contribution should not go unnoticed by the House.

The airport was well regarded by the people and airlines that used it, and it was frequently rated by *Which?* magazine as the best airport in the UK, with excellent customer service and passenger experience. Passenger numbers were continuing to grow prior to the pandemic, with more than 1.4 million passengers in 2019. From my many discussions with hon. Members from Doncaster and the Doncaster area—quite a few of them are sitting around me tonight—I know that its closure was deeply felt by the local community. I understand that the "Save Doncaster Sheffield airport" petition has had more than 100,000 signatures, which is impressive.

I am pleased to hear about the progress made in the airport's reopening and the benefits that could bring, which I will come to shortly, but I want to set out the importance of aviation for the growth and prosperity of the nation. Madam Deputy Speaker, you know that I grew up under an aviation runway in my home constituency of Wythenshawe and Sale East. Going to Manchester airport as a child and seeing the BAC One-Elevens, the Tridents and the Concorde, and even the space shuttle doing a low pass on the back of a jumbo jet in the mid-1980s, was inspirational for me, as it is for so many people as a career for the future.

As we keep saying, growth is this Government's No. 1 priority. In her recent speech, the Chancellor was clear about the importance of the aviation sector in enabling that economic growth. Her speech invited proposals for a third runway at Heathrow and announced a new partnership between Prologis and East Midlands airport to build a new advanced manufacturing park, unlocking £1 billion in investment and jobs. That is a clear

demonstration of how aviation can contribute significantly to the economy, through being a key enabler of international trade, investments and connectivity.

Aviation is also a major employer in its own right, as I see in my own constituency. In 2022, the air transport and aerospace sectors alone directly provided around 240,000 jobs across the UK, providing opportunities in every part of the country. Overall, in 2023 the air transport and aerospace sectors directly contributed over £20 billion to UK GDP. That is why aviation is a key component of the Government's transport strategy, enabling economic growth and connectivity, and investing in sustainability by connecting people, places and business.

Regional airports such as Doncaster Sheffield airport have an important role to play. They serve our local communities—people are proud of them—and they serve business by supporting thousands of jobs in the regions and acting as a gateway to international opportunities, whether that is a family holiday or supporting major investment decisions. They also provide important connectivity, helping to connect communities across the UK and the wider world.

I have been interested in hearing about the South Yorkshire airport city vision, which has the reopened airport at its heart. It is proposed that a reopened Doncaster Sheffield airport could help to raise economic and social wellbeing in Doncaster, delivering employment and facilitating wider development, which could help to unlock growth for South Yorkshire. As my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme said, the council's business case indicates that the airport's reopening and wider development has the potential to support more than 5,000 direct jobs, boost the economy by £5 billion and provide wider welfare benefits of £2 billion by 2050.

I welcome the efforts of the council and the Mayors of Doncaster and of South Yorkshire to secure the future of the airport and the economic opportunities for the region. Significant progress has already been made, with the agreement of City of Doncaster council to lease the airport. The return of aviation activities in December last year was an important milestone, as was mentioned, as 2Excel landed the first aircraft there in three years. As the aviation Minister, I add my thanks and congratulations to it for sticking with the airport.

As my hon. Friend said, another important milestone was reached earlier this month, as Munich Airport International was appointed by City of Doncaster council to help to progress the airport's reopening. There will be many more milestones and many more challenges, but, as the Chancellor set out in her recent speech, this Government will work with City of Doncaster council and the Mayor of South Yorkshire to support their efforts to reopen Doncaster Sheffield airport as a thriving regional airport.

As well as the airport, this Government are committed to supporting all modes of travel in the region to support the local economy. Last November, South Yorkshire was allocated £17 million-worth of bus improvement plans and funding to support bus services. Just last

week, the Mayor of South Yorkshire was informed that he would receive more than £5 million in the next financial year to invest in active travel, which is in addition to almost £9 million for South Yorkshire. In January, the Department announced funding for low-emission vehicles as part of the levy funding, as well as funding for zero-emission buses, proving the Government's commitment to decarbonisation.

The South Yorkshire mayoral combined authority received £8.4 million of funding from the ZEBRA 1 programme for 27 electric buses and charging infrastructure. Furthermore, the Government are progressing planning and design work to support future delivery of our plans for northern rail connectivity, and we will set out details in due course. That will inform the work being undertaken, such as the development of Rotherham mainline station. I am also pleased to support South Yorkshire's local transport priorities with an investment of £570 million through the city region sustainable transport settlements programme. That is a five-year deal with £5.7 billion of Government investment to improve the transport networks of eight city regions across the UK.

As part of our commitment to local transport, we announced in the autumn Budget that we will uplift funds and funding nationally in this area in 2025-26 by £200 million, helping to improve the local transport in our largest city regions and drive growth and productivity across the country. I mention that because transport is a rich tapestry, and having an airport as a hub is important. We know that the destinations that airports reach are dependent on public transport penetration time of within an hour, so improving public transport and active travel in this area will help Doncaster Sheffield airport to reach the markets it wants to reach in the future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme also spoke about airspace at Doncaster Sheffield airport. Airspace modernisation is one of our manifesto commitments, and the Government are committed to its delivery. It remains a key aviation priority for the Department, which aims to deliver quicker, quieter and cleaner journeys to benefit those who use and are affected by UK airspace. We have seen great progress in airspace modernisation in the north, with airports now preparing for their public consultations. I know that officials and the Civil Aviation Authority will be working tirelessly to make sure that we reopen that airspace in the interests of Doncaster Sheffield airport.

Again, I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate, which has been an opportunity for hon. Members to highlight the importance of Doncaster Sheffield airport to their constituents and regions. My officials and I look forward to continuing engagement with both South Yorkshire combined authority and City of Doncaster council to support their efforts to reopen this airport.

Question put and agreed to.

7.55 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 25 February 2025

[SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE *in the Chair*]

Maternity Services

9.30 am

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): I beg to move,
That this House has considered maternity services.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank all the Members in attendance for their interest in this important topic and the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time to debate maternity services in England.

On average, a baby is born in England every 56 seconds, over 1,500 babies each day, most of them delivered in an NHS setting with the help and support of a maternity department or at home with an NHS community midwife by their side. That is over 500,000 babies every year. I contributed to that statistic in 2014 and 2019 when I gave birth to my children at St Richard's hospital in Chichester. Two very different births that I will not spend my valuable time in this debate reflecting on, because there are far more important voices that need to be heard and considered. A person is at their most vulnerable moment when they or their partner go into labour. We put our health, safety, and the safety of our unborn child into the hands of professionals who work in that setting—the midwives, obstetricians, anaesthetists, and neonatologists—to support us in the safe delivery of our child and get us all home safe. And in the majority of births that is the case.

However, several investigations have revealed fundamental flaws in how maternity care is delivered across England. A Care Quality Commission inspection of 131 maternity units found that 65% were not safe for women to give birth in, with studies showing that one fifth of all causes of stillbirth are potentially preventable. The Ockenden report, led by Donna Ockenden, investigated the maternity services at the Shrewsbury and Telford Hospital NHS Trust, but it also highlighted the flaws in maternity care across England. The report laid out immediate and essential actions which are key to reforming maternity services and ensuring that every mother and baby receive the care they deserve and should expect. In her report Donna reflected that sometimes that spotlight can feel harsh to staff on the front line, who are doing their very best in what are often extremely challenging circumstances.

In conversation with midwives and others working in the maternity care sector, I recognise that each one I spoke to entered the profession as a result of a calling, vocation, or passion for supporting mothers to bring their babies into the world. They are frontline NHS staff who often go above and beyond the call of duty to support and care for their patients in those extraordinary hours and days. Midwives in particular spend significant time with expectant mothers, supporting them through all stages of pregnancy and birth. They see women at their most vulnerable. They act as therapists, teachers, friends and maternal figures. Yet across the country, staffing levels are inadequate. In 2023, midwives and support workers worked over 100,000 hours of

unpaid overtime every week. The pressure and stress on them is immense and this leads to burnout, absenteeism, high staff turnover and the loss of experienced professionals from the field, and that ultimately puts patient safety at risk.

Jeremy Hunt (Godalming and Ash) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing forward this debate and the excellent and persuasive way that she is making her case. On burnout, does she agree that one of the biggest issues is that when a tragedy happens, midwives and obstetricians often feel that if they speak out the risk is that they or their institution will get sued, or that they could get fired from their jobs? Does she agree that litigation reform to try and change the rules of the game, so that people are able to be open when they think they have made a mistake and learn from those mistakes, is one of the most important ways that we could improve the record on patient safety, which is as much a concern to her as it is to me?

Jess Brown-Fuller: I agree wholeheartedly that we need to change the way that we do litigation, because NHS trusts often argue that they want to learn and grow from poor experiences, but the litigation system means that they rarely have the opportunity to do so, because everybody is so afraid to speak out. We need to change that culture within maternity services and the NHS as a whole.

As a country, we are training more midwives than ever before, yet retention remains a problem and the pandemic exacerbated an already difficult situation, with highly trained midwives with families or caring responsibilities leaving the profession too soon.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend on bringing this debate here today. Frimley Park hospital in my constituency received an outstanding report from the Care Quality Commission in 2023, but it none the less identified that inadequate staffing remains one of the highest risks on the maternity register. That has daily implications; many midwives reported, for example, that daily checks were often incomplete, handovers were interrupted and not standardised, and mandatory training was often not completed.

Does my hon. Friend agree that to ensure high-quality maternity care, from admission to discharge, requires not only stringent oversight by trust boards, but far greater care for staff in the setting of the hospital, providing safe spaces where conversations can be had, handovers can take place, and nurses can rest? In that way, we will both retain and also hopefully recruit more of our vital nursing staff.

Jess Brown-Fuller: My hon. Friend is absolutely right; the key to providing strong maternity services that benefit both the staff and the patients is making sure that there is a full workforce so that they can do not just the “need to haves”, but the “nice to haves” in a maternity department, which can make such a difference to patients' experiences when they are going through that service.

The retention issue that we have directly impacts training. Newly qualified and inexperienced midwives need experienced mentors, but if seasoned professionals leave, the next generation lacks the support necessary to transition into leadership roles. Midwives and other

[*Jess Brown-Fuller*]

maternity staff must train together at every level to be fully equipped for every situation, and ensure that concerns can be escalated effectively. That is why the Ockenden report and the Royal College of Midwives seek a commitment to including midwives in the long-term workforce plan.

In 2017, bursaries for student nurses and midwives were ended, with the Royal College of Midwives warning that that decision threatened the future of our maternity services in England. It has led to one third of midwifery students having debts exceeding £40,000, with 80% of them knowing someone who has dropped out of their course due to financial hardship. Many also take on additional jobs to afford their studies, which detracts from their vital training. To mitigate those pressures on trainee midwives, I encourage the Government to explore alternative routes to support midwifery and nursing students, which have been laid out by the Royal College of Midwives, through new funding options or a scheme where student debt is forgiven after a defined period of service in the NHS.

A similar funding issue affects apprenticeship schemes in midwifery. Despite receiving overwhelmingly positive feedback from trusts across the country regarding the apprenticeship route, many trusts cannot afford to offer those positions due to a lack of backfill funds, so trusts often hand back their apprenticeship levy, as the scheme is undeliverable. I hope the Minister will work with her colleagues in the Department for Education to address this fundamental flaw in the delivery of level 6 and level 7 apprenticeships, which have proven to deliver the midwives of the future.

In preparing for today's debate, I was invited to my local maternity unit at St Richard's hospital in Chichester, where as I mentioned I had both of my children. University Hospitals Sussex had its maternity services inspected by the CQC in September 2021, which found all hospitals across the trust to be inadequate or requiring improvement. Although there has not been a formal inspection since, the trust assures me that all actions from the CQC have been completed, with the majority of the Ockenden immediate and essential actions implemented. However, to fully implement all the IEAs will require funding, which currently the trust does not have.

St Richard's hospital confidently tells me that it is now fully staffed for the first time in a long time, and the director of maternity services is keen to look at how she can further improve patient experience and communication. I know Members across the House are keen to work with their NHS trusts constructively to ensure the best outcomes possible for their constituents. I was reassured by the senior leadership team, those working in the department, and the new parents on the ward, who I had the pleasure of congratulating. Introducing tiny babies to the world was probably the best moment of my recess—it was very bizarre for those parents when the MP walked in and said, "Can I say hello?" I am pleased that the trust is taking seriously its responsibility to provide a much improved service.

It would be a missed opportunity if I, as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for infant feeding, did not mention how we could do much more as a society to support mothers to breastfeed, if they choose

to. The UK's breastfeeding rates are among the lowest in the world. Only 1% of mothers exclusively breastfeed at six months, despite the World Health Organisation recommending exclusive breastfeeding for this period and continuation, alongside nutritious foods, for up to two years. Some 44% of mothers surveyed wished that they had breastfed for longer and would have done so if they had received better and more tailored support. New mothers need time, expertise and evidence-based information to make informed decisions on their feeding choices, and maternity services play a key role in establishing a feeding plan that works for mother and baby before they go home. But, across the country, community midwifery and health visiting services have been vaporised, so support is patchy and often delivered by volunteers or midwives in their spare time. I hope that the Government will support improved community services such as milk support groups, to give all women, regardless of their feeding choices, somewhere to turn when they need support.

I will take this opportunity, perhaps selfishly, to get on record the name of one of the coolest kids I ever met. Benedict Henry Goodfellow was an absolute dude—[*Interruption.*] I am not going to cry—and I am proud to call his mum, Steph, one of my close friends and the strongest woman I know. This debate is so important to me because Bendy needed 24-hour care since birth after a case of extreme birth trauma left him with devastating neurological damage. Bendy was loved by everyone who came into contact with him until he died, aged 10. The experience left Steph traumatised and profoundly changed. Bendy was born nearly 30 years ago and yet Steph and Ben's story is just as relevant today. It should not be.

I am immensely grateful to Donna Ockenden for putting me in touch with families from across the country—including from Leeds, Nottingham, Shrewsbury and Sussex—ahead of this debate to hear their personal experiences of failures in maternity care.

Katie White (Leeds North West) (Lab): As I am the Member for Leeds North West, the hon. Member may have spoken to my constituents, Dan and Fiona, who tragically lost their baby Aliona after only 27 minutes. Despite the fact that the inquest found a number of gross failings, the figures for Leeds, which came out only last night, are horrifying. Does the hon. Member agree that there are grounds for an independent review of maternity services in Leeds?

Jess Brown-Fuller: The hon. Member is absolutely right to raise the case of Dan and Fiona. I was lucky enough to have them give up their time to share their heartbreaking story with me. They are at the forefront of the fight for an independent inquiry in Leeds. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care said that he would look at whether there is cause for an investigation but those families are still waiting to find out if that will go ahead.

I met with families like Dan and Fiona to ensure that the questions I ask the Minister today are the questions that those families would ask if they had the opportunity. I cannot begin to imagine how exhausting it is to relive the moments that their lives changed forever, over and over again, in the pursuit of better outcomes for the next family. I will include a number of their questions to the Minister in my closing remarks, but I reflect that the

families who were able to share their experiences with me were, overwhelmingly, white, middle class, often highly educated and that many had medical backgrounds or academic careers before going through this trauma. Lord Darzi's report found that black women are almost three times as likely to die in childbirth as white women and that neonatal mortality in the most deprived areas is more than double that in the least deprived. Who speaks up for those families? Who ensures transparency and accountability for those with a fundamental distrust of the medical profession, or those who have learning disabilities, or English as their second language, because those people are not supported in navigating the complex systems that are in place?

Negligence claims in obstetrics account for just 13% of the volume of litigation received by NHS Resolution in 2023-24 but cost over £1 billion every year—nearly 60% of the total cost of clinical negligence claims. Beyond financial costs, those failures carry a devastating human toll. If we truly invest in our maternity services, in both professionals and facilities, more than money is saved; lives are saved.

In conclusion, I would like to ask the following questions of the Minister. First, the previous Government were supportive of the Ockenden review, and previous health Ministers had made assurances that maternity services were going to get the support they desperately needed. I know the Secretary of State for Health is supportive of the Ockenden review and has met many bereaved parents since the general election. He has assured those parents that fixing maternity is a priority for the Government, and that actions would be outlined publicly before Christmas 2024. He came back shortly after Christmas saying they needed more time. That response is now two months overdue. Can the Minister assure me that those families will hear an update in the near future?

Do the Government support all the Ockenden report's immediate and essential actions arising from the review into the Shrewsbury and Telford trust? How will the Government ensure that all integrated care boards and trusts across the UK implement all the actions? What support will be provided to the trusts to achieve that, and prevent a postcode lottery of maternity care?

If those IEAs are implemented, what will be the Government's measure of success? We currently have no national data regarding preventable deaths. It is the charitable sector that has determined that more than 800 baby deaths a year could have been prevented. One of the IEAs is a long-term plan to secure a safe maternity workforce and improve training. Can we expect to see maternity care professionals, including neonatologists, obstetricians and anaesthetists, included alongside midwifery colleagues in the refresh of the 10-year workforce plan for the NHS?

An overriding theme in my conversations with bereaved parents was the CQC's hesitancy to prosecute. Cases were often supported in the first instance, but families were then informed, just days before the three-year statute of limitations expired, that the CQC would no longer be seeking a prosecution, with the families having no time to appeal that decision. Does the Minister believe that a three-year statute of limitations is appropriate when families dealing with bereavement are often not even considering a case in the first 12 months?

Does the Minister have any concerns about the CQC's ability as a regulator? Or does she agree with the parents that there is a reluctance to prosecute by the leadership of CQC when there have been failures in patient care? Does the Minister support calls from Sands and Tommy's charities for all triage phonelines to be recorded, as currently they are not?

Finally, parents repeatedly reported to me that the bereavement care they received felt like a tick-box exercise, with a lot of focus on the mother and a lack of communication and support for the father, when both have suffered that bereavement. Does the Minister agree that communication could be vastly improved across maternity services in all cases, so that both parents have the opportunity to understand what happened in those most vulnerable hours?

I would like to finish by thanking every Member who has come to talk about this important issue. I also thank Donna Ockenden and all who contributed to the creation of the review. My greatest thanks go to all the families who gave up their time to share their stories with me, reminding me that those babies were people, not statistics. They are loved, they are missed, and they deserved better.

9.48 am

Dr Beccy Cooper (Worthing West) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) for calling this debate. As neighbouring parliamentarians on the south coast, we are both passionate champions of the health of our residents and want the best healthcare provision for all, and that includes maternity services.

Unfortunately, despite numerous reviews, plans and strategies, too many maternity services remain shockingly, stubbornly poor, as the hon. Member pointed out. Successive investigations into high-profile failures have described a pattern of dysfunctional and even dangerous cultures, with a failure to listen to families and missed opportunities to address known issues. As a result, too many mothers and babies have experienced substandard care and unacceptably poor outcomes.

In the past year, the number of maternity services in England receiving ratings of inadequate or requires improvement from the CQC increased from 54% to 67%. Of the 131 maternity services inspected from August 2022 to December 2023, only 4% were rated outstanding, and not one was rated outstanding for safety. In that context, we see stagnating progress on improving stillbirth and maternal mortality rates not seen in the UK for over 20 years.

As we have heard, black women are almost three times as likely, and Asian women almost twice as likely, as white women to die during birth or post-natally. Maternal mortality rates for women from the most socioeconomically deprived areas are twice those for women from the least deprived areas. Closing the black and Asian maternal mortality gap and tackling profound health inequalities such as those is rightly a priority for this Labour Government, and it is the reason I went into politics.

Poor outcomes exist, too, for the most vulnerable and marginalised women, such as refugees, LGBTQ+ women, prisoners, those who have been through the care system and those who have experienced domestic violence or sexual abuse. All of them are more likely to experience

[Dr Beccy Cooper]

poorer maternity care and the resultant trauma. Poor standards in maternity services are part of a wider picture of a healthcare system that has not prioritised women's reproductive health.

The Women and Equalities Committee highlights that gynaecological care waiting lists have grown faster than lists in any other specialty in recent years. As a public health professional, it saddens me to say this, but the NHS Confederation reports that the UK stands out as the country with the largest female health gap in the G20 and the 12th largest globally, with women spending three more years in ill health and disability compared with men. Those systemic failings underpin the poor outcomes and health inequalities that we see in maternity care.

As a public health doctor, I have worked in and led health teams, and as the proud MP for Worthing West, I have heard from dedicated staff across our local services. I understand that systemic issues fail staff as well as patients. In our hospital in Worthing, the maternity services are staffed by hard-working, capable healthcare professionals who want to get on with the job they have trained for. They are as frustrated and saddened as the rest of us when processes, equipment, staffing levels and governance are simply inadequate for the provision of excellent healthcare.

Our Government have pledged to recruit and train thousands more midwives, which is to be warmly welcomed. The forthcoming 10-year plan for the NHS is an opportunity to address the underlying problems of a deskilled and demoralised workforce, which impact maternity services. We must take action to improve midwife training and retention, address the numbers of qualified medical staff on maternity wards, improve patient voice and bring a relentless focus to safety and compassion.

There is an urgent need to transform the health and social care system. In doing so, we have a superb opportunity to look at innovative models of integrated and accessible "neighbourhood health" maternity services, delivered alongside hospital care. Finally, I welcome the recommendations of the APPG on birth trauma for a national maternity improvement strategy and a maternity commissioner to drive improved outcomes and rebuild our services.

9.52 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I commend the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) for setting the scene so well. I thank her for sharing her personal stories; nothing sets out an issue better than a personal story. I am my party's health spokesperson, but it is always good to give a local perspective too. I look forward to the responses from the Minister and Opposition spokespersons—the trio here today seem to be in all the debates on this subject, and I thank them for their contributions.

Our maternity services in Northern Ireland are crucial and, arguably, among the most consistent services offered by the NHS. Although all our services are important, everyone must be born and must be given the best start in life, and it is through our wonderful NHS maternity services that we are able to succeed.

My constituency resides within the South Eastern health and social care trust, which offers both midwifery-led and consultant-led care, with a fantastic focus on personalised support for mothers through their pregnancy and after labour. The trust also provides antenatal clinics, home visits and care options for expecting mothers.

Back home in Northern Ireland, in October 2024, an independent review concluded that a co-ordinated system-wide change is needed to radically improve maternity care. There are problems with maternity care not just here on the mainland, but with us back home. The Minister does not have a responsibility for that, but she has an interest in all things pertinent to Northern Ireland. Whatever the subject matter, and whenever I ask her for help, as I always do, she always responds in a positive fashion, and I appreciate that.

There are clear inequalities in services across Northern Ireland. It is no secret that the health service has witnessed extreme difficulties over the last couple of decades. More must be done to support staff and to ensure safe and quality care, so that women and families feel supported through their journeys during pregnancy and labour.

One of my constituents gave birth to her first baby just last week, and I want to record what she said, because I think that that is important. Her experience was made by the incredible student midwives who supported her and held her hand the entire way. When my three boys were born—that was not yesterday—I was there with my wife. She held my hand, and the blood circulation in my hand got less and less as my dear, loving wife's pain increased. I say that because we have to give some credit to the student midwives who are there for what they do.

The Department of Health and Social Care has increased the number of commissioned pre-registration nursing and midwifery university places from 680 in 2013 to 1,335 in 2023. Those are good figures, but unfortunately, due to budgetary constraints, the number of places returned to the baseline of 1,025 in 2023-24. So there was an increase sometime back, but the numbers have levelled out again.

Thousands of people across Northern Ireland apply to study nursing and midwifery each year. The number of midwifery training places is extremely limited, and demand often exceeds the number of available spots. The Royal College of Midwives has noticed a downward trend in midwifery applicants and has stated that that is a concern, expressing apprehension about the significant drop in the number of applicants. For the record, has the Minister had an opportunity—she probably has—to get the opinion of the Royal College of Midwives on where we are and how we could help?

We must look at why this is happening. It could be said that, because midwifery is a challenging field to get into, many do not see the point in applying directly for it. Again, what are the Minister's thoughts on how we improve things? Additionally, some have stated that it is easier to progress in a career by going in at entry level, as opposed to starting university after school and trying to get a job after.

There must be ambitious reform of these services to ensure that we can support expectant mothers and give them memorable and positive experiences. We often hear of horror stories, and we must allow for the best start in life for babies and families.

To conclude, we have some of the best staff in our maternity wards, and their work and dedication must be recognised. They are hammered day and daily in their jobs, due to budgetary constraints and the inability to get the support they need. I look to the Minister and the Government to give a commitment to our NHS—and, more importantly, to those who work in it—that more will be done to properly fund our wonderful maternity services across the whole of this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and to give families and parents the best possible start to their children's lives. I request that the Minister have discussions with the relevant Minister in Northern Ireland, Mike Nesbitt, on what we are doing back home, so that we can work better together.

9.57 am

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) for securing this important debate. I should note at the start my officership in the APPG for infant feeding and the APPG on single-parent families.

Women's health is often an already under-prioritised area of our health system, with the UK found to have the largest female health gap in the G20, as my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Dr Cooper) noted earlier. Women are falling through the gaps, which have been made worse by the past 14 years of austerity and reorganisations in the health system.

The situation facing midwifery and maternity services is even more dire. As a member of the Health and Social Care Committee I have met the Royal College of Midwives, which made clear its worries about the need for better investment in midwifery and maternity services, and its concerns about safe staffing levels in a workforce facing crisis.

Those real concerns are borne out by the national review of maternity services, which found that 47% of services were rated as requiring improvement on safety grounds. That is not to say there are not bright spots of positivity, and I have nothing but praise for the work of Calderdale's maternity services, which were fantastic and supportive at the births of both my children. However, the national picture is one of services that are stretched and midwives who are working extra hours to plug the gaps. At the end of last year, figures showed that more midwives than before have left the profession after five years or less.

The story across the health service is, sadly, consistent, and that is the result of pressure in an NHS that Lord Darzi warned was on life support. That is why the NHS 10-year plan is even more vital and timely. It gives us not only a real opportunity to begin undoing 14 years of damage to our health service, but the chance to rebalance our health system and focus on different priorities that have been long neglected, be that maternity services or mental health. Women who access maternity services often do so at a time when they feel most vulnerable, and it is important that those services are there to protect them at that time.

10 am

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Christopher. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester

(Jess Brown-Fuller) on securing this hugely important debate. Today I will highlight both the excellence and the challenges of maternity services in my constituency of Epsom and Ewell.

Last year, the dedicated staff of Epsom and St Helier university hospitals delivered more than 3,400 babies. Their commitment to patient care is outstanding, with care being ranked No. 1 in London for patient experience. Both units have also achieved UNICEF UK baby friendly hospital initiative gold accreditation, reflecting their exceptional support for new mothers' feeding choices. Those outcomes are testament to the experience, compassion and hard work of the staff, despite the conditions they work under.

Our maternity services are held back by infrastructure that is simply not fit for purpose. Some of the hospital buildings at Epsom and St Helier are older than the NHS itself. Those conditions make it harder to provide the high standards of care that mothers and babies deserve. At St Helier hospital, the maternity unit's lift regularly breaks down, making it increasingly difficult to safely transfer maternity patients to intensive care or the main theatres. Both Epsom and St Helier hospitals lack waiting areas and suitable space to maintain privacy, making it harder to implement a nationally mandated triage system and to provide private spaces, which are vital for bereaved families.

Every year, the trust spends millions just on patching up these crumbling facilities, which is not sustainable. The cost of maintaining outdated buildings and equipment diverts critical resources away from the frontline. Furthermore, staff are stretched thin by running duplicate services across two sites, which affects patient outcomes. The promised new hospital in Sutton was meant to solve those problems by bringing together emergency care, maternity services and in-patient paediatrics in a modern, specialist facility. However, the Government have pushed construction back to at least 2032, leaving our community in limbo. Meanwhile, Epsom general hospital alone needs £44 million-worth of repairs, with 46% classed as high risk, meaning that failure to address them could lead to serious injury or major service disruption. If the UK is to be the safest place in the world to have a baby, we must do better.

Beyond the building, staffing remains a critical issue. A local midwife recently shared with me the reality of working in our maternity services. She described how the staffing problems in maternity continue to be dire. There simply are not enough midwives rostered each day to cover the work, which makes it unsafe for women and their babies, and creates an unsustainable working environment for those left behind. Midwives are working longer hours, starting early or leaving late, taking on more than they should just to ensure women are seen. This leads to burnout, and many midwives ultimately leave the profession as they feel that the stress and huge responsibilities are not matched by adequate support or fair pay.

As a woman, the midwife told me how deeply saddened she is that this is the service being offered to women in this country. The care a woman receives during childbirth has lifelong implications—not just for her, but for her children and for society as a whole. She worries that women's choices, particularly around home births, are becoming increasingly sidelined. Women's autonomy over their own bodies is becoming less relevant, and she

[Helen Maguire]

fears what that means for the future of maternity care for our daughters and granddaughters. Her worries reflect those of so many across the country.

I have three children, all of whom were born successfully in London. I wanted a home birth for all of them. Sadly, we were only successful in having one home birth due to complications, but I am grateful that I had the choice. I thank Brierly midwives for that, but not every woman today has that choice.

The people of Epsom and Ewell, Leatherhead and Ashted—and around the UK—deserve outstanding maternity care, unhampered by crumbling infrastructure, chronic understaffing and a lack of investment. As a first step, I urge the Government to release the full impact assessment of the delays to the new hospital programme and reconsider the decision. We cannot afford to let maternity services deteriorate any further. The safety of women, babies and midwives depends on it.

10.4 am

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Christopher. I thank the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) for securing this debate. Fundamentally, it is about giving kids the best start in life and giving mums the best care. There are few subjects of more importance to us, right across the House.

The evidence is clear that midwife-led maternity units are great for babies and mums. They are every bit as safe as the big hospitals we have heard many hon. Members talk about today, and one of the benefits they offer is the option of a more natural birth, with less intervention from health professionals, unless it is necessary. Mums who deliver in a midwife-led unit are less likely to need a caesarean or help from forceps or a vacuum. While those procedures can be life-saving, and we should thank the people who use them every day to support babies into this world, they come with downsides. Caesareans increase the risk for mums, including haemorrhage, blood clots and infections in the womb, and they take much longer to recover from. The potential side effects of forceps and vacuums are less severe but are, nonetheless, very real.

As the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) said, choice is important for mums. So that people can have the birth they want, we should make sure that, when they come to the end of their pregnancy, they can choose where they want to deliver—be that at home, in a more clinical setting if there are additional risks, or in a midwife-led unit.

In Lichfield, we were lucky enough to have a fantastic midwife-led maternity unit at Samuel Johnson community hospital. The unit was closed during the pandemic for reasons we all understand, given the national crisis, but it has never reopened. The closest maternity unit is at Queen's hospital in Burton, 11 miles up the A38. When High Speed 2 is not destroying the transport infrastructure in my constituency, that is not necessarily a significant trip in an ambulance, but it presents barriers to those who do not have access to their own transport. It is currently the only option available to people in Lichfield.

However, mums in Lichfield will soon not be able to choose that midwife-led unit because it is on the chopping block. That would be a huge loss. The service gives women in Lichfield, Burntwood and the surrounding villages somewhere close to home to deliver in a calmer, quieter setting than the big hospital. Where that is appropriate, I think everybody in this room, and people much more widely, would want to support it.

Shutting the midwife-led unit would mean less choice for mums, and potentially worse outcomes for mums and babies. I have met many people whose children were born in that unit and who are so happy to have had the option. When I mentioned that I was taking part in this debate, one of my staff members said, without prompting, that she had had four kids—two in the clinical setting of a big hospital, and two at the Samuel Johnson community hospital. She was so much happier with her experience in the midwife-led unit. She was not, in any way, talking down what happened in the other hospital, but the more natural, quieter and more relaxed environment was a benefit as she was going through childbirth.

I thank everybody who works in maternity services, and I particularly thank those who champion midwife-led units.

10.8 am

Liz Jarvis (Eastleigh) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Christopher. I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) for securing this important debate, which is particularly important to my constituents Charlotte and James.

In April 2019, Charlotte gave birth to a daughter, Norah. Norah was given the all-clear by a doctor but quickly became poorly. Despite concerning oxygen saturation results, Norah was not rushed to the neonatal intensive care unit. She died very suddenly that same night. Charlotte and James are still fighting for the truth about why their daughter died.

The UK should be the safest place in the world to have a baby. However, according to the Care Quality Commission's most recent figures, nearly two thirds of England's maternity services are not safe enough. We must see an end to understaffed maternity units, and I am sure the Minister will agree that addressing disparities in obstetric care is essential for a fair society.

Women and their babies deserve better. All pregnant women in my Eastleigh constituency and across the UK should have access to safe and fully resourced maternity care. However, according to NHS data and the Royal College of Midwives, the number of people in the maternity workforce is shrinking. Midwives and maternity support workers are working in excess of 100,000 hours a week in unpaid overtime. The result is that many staff experience stress and burnout, with some midwives saying that they feel uncared for at work, unable to take breaks to get a drink of water or use the loo, and—with the best will in the world—unable to deliver the kind of maternity care that women expect and deserve. How can the NHS be expected to deliver a higher quality of care with fewer, already very overworked staff? Health outcomes for mothers and babies will only decline if commitments in the workforce plan are not ambitious and funded.

I also highlight the often overlooked factor of mental health in maternity care. According to the Maternal Mental Health Alliance, one in five women experiences a perinatal mental health problem, and 70% will conceal or underplay maternal mental health difficulties. Tragically, suicide is the leading cause of maternal death in the first year after birth.

As we have heard, on average a baby is born in England every 56 seconds. The Royal College of Midwives states that no other NHS service has as much contact over a prolonged period with so many normally healthy individuals. With a properly staffed and resourced maternity service, there is great potential to use this period to ensure that, after leaving hospital, mothers are mentally in the best possible position to care for their newborns. I fully support the Liberal Democrats' manifesto commitment to transforming perinatal mental health and offering more support for those who are pregnant, new mothers and those who sadly experience miscarriage or stillbirth.

It is welcome that maternity services are important to the Government, but I share the view of the Royal College of Midwives that this priority must be reflected in how maternity services feature in the 10-year health plan, with a decade of ambition and focus, as well as a commitment to proper funding.

10.11 am

Tom Rutland (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) for securing this important debate.

Maternity services are a vital part of our national health service. They are unique in that they are entrusted not only with the care of newborns at their most vulnerable and mothers at their time of greatest need, but also with ensuring that the wondrous process of bringing a new life into the world is a safe one. For many families, it is, and I thank those in our NHS who work tirelessly to deliver the best care they can, especially against the backdrop of 14 years of chronic underfunding of services and of conditions that are not acceptable in a modern healthcare system.

However, for too many families in East Worthing and Shoreham, and others served by hospitals in the University Hospitals Sussex NHS foundation trust, maternity services are not performing as they should, despite the hard work of many staff. All four maternity units in the trust have been determined by the CQC to be inadequate or requiring improvement, showing just how urgently that change is needed.

Behind each rating and category are the devastating experiences of real people. I have met families in my constituency who have had to endure the most tragic and unimaginable suffering as a result of having received inadequate care from the trust's maternity services. Some families are living through the devastation of stillbirth. In one case, a baby with no underlying conditions, who in the eyes of all involved was completely healthy, tragically died. Numerous issues should have triggered additional monitoring and alternative care pathways, but they were never acted on. In that case, the trust admitted failures in care to the parents, but I am aware of failures in other cases.

Another family—who were, again, due to welcome into the world a healthy baby with no underlying health conditions—suffered horrendously because of misdiagnosis,

delayed treatment and a missed opportunity for a caesarean. These errors were compounded by poor communication and note keeping, which resulted in clinical staff not being aware of earlier events, and yet another unimaginable tragedy taking place. Sadly, these families are not alone. A group of bereaved families in Sussex, who no doubt wish they had no reason to know each other, have come together to call for action to ensure that no expectant parents have to endure what they have gone through.

I am glad that our Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care have rightly prioritised maternity service improvements as part of their plan to change our NHS. They too feel the urgency for change that many of my constituents feel.

I am grateful to the families in my constituency who have channelled their grief into the courage to share their harrowing stories with me, and to the Health Secretary for meeting families previously in the care of the University Hospitals Sussex NHS foundation trust to hear their experiences and calls for action. We need action. With a new baby born every minute, we cannot delay or defer making our maternity services safe for all, including by tackling racial inequalities in care. The need is now and the urgency is clear.

10.15 am

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Christopher, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) on securing this important debate. We are here today because maternity services are not at the level that they need to be at. There are many, many fantastic services across the country, but we are here to highlight those that need urgent improvement to improve outcomes for all mothers, not just some.

The excellent report that the all-party parliamentary group for birth trauma produced last year is to be commended for the way that it highlighted the fact that, for a minority of women, the experience of childbirth is traumatic and has long-lasting consequences. The section about stillbirth and neonatal death includes a submission from one mother who reported:

"The scenes in theatre can only be described as chaotic and these along with subsequent events have left me traumatised and suffering with PTSD."

I pay tribute to the Brontë birth centre in my constituency of Dewsbury and Batley, a midwife-led birthing centre in the Dewsbury and District hospital. It recently reopened in April after having been closed for two years because of staff shortages. Two of my children were born there more than 20 years ago, so it will always have a special place in my heart. I would not want my comments to be misconstrued as criticism of the services it provides.

We have heard about the difference between midwife-led and consultant-led services, and we have heard about positive examples of where midwife-led services are more appropriate and can deliver better care. I am not making a point about midwife-led versus consultant-led care: the APPG report also cites horror stories from women in childbirth where consultants were present. Rather, my point is that, in reviewing maternity provision and seeking to minimise the risk to women during childbirth, we should also ensure seamless obstetrician provision for midwife-led care if required. If mothers giving birth in the Brontë birth centre encounter complications that require more in-depth medical care—God forbid—they would need to be moved from Dewsbury

[Iqbal Mohamed]

to Wakefield, which is a journey of more than half an hour. That increases the risks to the mother and the unborn child, so I would like the Government to address that issue.

For many who have experienced emergency situations, the image painted earlier of sheer terror and panic is all too real. It is likely that maternity services will fail to meet the national maternity safety ambition to halve the 2010 rate of stillbirths by 2025—indeed, recent figures suggest the 20% decline in stillbirth deaths achieved between 2010 and 2020 is in reverse—so it is imperative that we explore every aspect of maternity provision to ensure it is as safe as it can be.

Although almost 61% of maternity services are rated good, only 1% are rated outstanding, and just under 38% are still rated as requiring improvement for safety. Improving maternity services in the NHS is a critical priority, and the many reports since 2010 have made several key recommendations to enhance care quality and safety. I would like the Minister to share what steps the Government are taking, or will take, to address workforce gaps where the need to recruit and retain more midwives and maternity staff is essential to provide adequate support for mothers and babies. What steps are the Government taking to reduce health inequalities, to tackle disparities in maternal health outcomes, particularly for black and ethnic minority women and those in deprived areas? How will the Government ensure that adequate funding—including the reinstatement of the bursaries for midwives and nurses—is available and allocated to deliver the best quality maternity services?

Enhancing maternal mental health support for women with long-term mental health conditions is crucial. Listening to women's experiences is also key; the continuous gathering of feedback and acting on it are essential to improve care. What are the Government doing to implement anti-racism strategies so trusts can set clear standards of behaviour to support both staff and patients? If implemented, these improvements will help ensure that all mothers receive safe, high-quality care during pregnancy and birth.

10.21 am

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) on securing today's debate. My constituents are watching at home and she eloquently set out the challenges that face our maternity services and the health of women across the UK, so I thank her for doing that so well.

When people in Redditch elect their Members of Parliament, they do so with a clear mandate on maternity services and the future of the Alexandra hospital. It would be remiss of me not to thank the shadow spokesperson, the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) who did a tour of service at our hospital in the earlier parts of his career—we thank him for that.

Our maternity services are famed for delivering one Harry Styles many years ago—[*Interruption.*] Yes, just the one Harry Styles. More seriously, in 2015 our maternity services were closed and relocated to Worcestershire Royal. That temporary relocation was made permanent in 2017. That is the only site delivering such services

across our entire county. That means many of my residents are forced to travel to Worcester or Birmingham to get the services they need.

Although the hon. Member for Chichester was brave enough to share some of the stories that she has heard from her constituents, I am quite frankly not strong enough to retell some of the stories I have heard—of stillbirths and, frighteningly, of parents giving birth to their children on the roadside—in the way that they deserve. Since 2015, the initial promises to return those services to my constituency have been forgotten. Despite signatories totalling over 50,000 from the local community, no parameters for the return of such services have been discussed by the ICB.

I want safe services for my constituents, but although I am concerned by the current configuration of services, I am deeply concerned about the future of services in my constituency. Worcestershire Royal has significant constraints on growth. Worcestershire is set to deliver tens of thousands of new homes and huge population growth in the next 10 years, with pressures on services set to rise substantially. As this Government seek to rebuild and reconfigure our NHS, it is time for those services to meet the needs of the present and, most importantly, deliver the services of the future. I urge the Government to review the decisions taken on the centralisation of services that may have made sense in the past, but will not in the future.

Mr Angus MacDonald (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): I am proud to represent Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire. My colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), could not be here, but, on the subject of centralisation, our nearest maternity hospital is in Inverness, which is four hours each way from parts of Sutherland, Argyll, and the Isle of Eigg—around Muck, which I am sure the hon. Member is, or should be, familiar with. I wonder whether the hon. Member could support our case that centralisation is becoming a real problem for expectant mothers, who suffer enormous complications because of distance, given that smaller regional hospitals are no longer providing maternity care?

Chris Bloore: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and I am sorry to hear about the level of problems that mothers face in his constituency. The hon. Member for Chichester started the debate saying that this is about services for women at their most vulnerable, when they are giving birth. It is clear from the experiences of the hon. Gentleman's constituents and mine that services are not meeting the needs of those women when they need them the most. That is the challenge that we should now take up.

I conclude by saying that, in the past, the reconfiguration of services has been based on a financial envelope and the challenges of staff shortages, and that has dictated many decisions, but now is the time, with the Darzi report and the eloquent speeches we have heard today, to build that service for the future. We should all strive to meet that challenge, even if that means making difficult financial decisions to invest in the long term, so that we can give women and families the support that they deserve.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): There are three speakers, and we have five minutes to go.

10.25 am

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) for securing this important debate. I will keep this brief and not reiterate all the things that have been said before, but there are a couple of points I want to make about how important it is to talk about women at the most vulnerable point in their lives, as well as the most vulnerable point for the babies who are being born. There cannot be a more important time in their lives than the moment when they are born, which is why it is so important to talk about this. I speak as a woman and a mother, but also as a human being. We are discussing the birth of the human race; I do not think there is anything more profound than that.

However, I will focus on something that has not been raised very much today: the role of the CQC in keeping our maternity services safe. One of the hospitals that serves my constituency of Chelmsford is Broomfield hospital, the maternity services rating of which was downgraded to inadequate at the beginning of January. That on its own is shocking and worrying enough. I have met the staff at Broomfield hospital and been to the maternity services there. I want to give it help and support so that it can improve. However, what concerns me is that the CQC carried out its inspection in March last year and only released its report in January. That is utterly unacceptable. How can we be expected to hold our services to account and how can we help them to improve if we do not even know what is wrong with them in the first place?

It is the CQC's job to tell us what is wrong with those services and lay it out bare so that we can learn from the things that go wrong and quickly put them right. It is not okay for the CQC to turn around and say "We have had technical difficulties with our new system and, therefore, we couldn't get the report out". That is not good enough. It is also not good enough for them to say "We shared some of our findings with the hospital, which is also making them public at the same time". It is simply not good enough. We need to support the CQC to do much better.

I am conscious of time and I know other Members want to speak, but I want to underline the importance of the role of the CQC, as well as the leadership across all of the NHS. From the excellent job that the midwives and the support staff do in maternity centres to the leadership of the hospitals, including the chief executives and the ICBs, everyone has a role to play in improving maternity services. The CQC also has a huge role to play, and it must do better.

10.27 am

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I will talk for about a minute. The Minister heard from me last autumn, when we had a debate about Gloucestershire's maternity services. The background remains as it was before, but there is an important update. When I was elected, Cheltenham general hospital's birth unit had been closed temporarily since Autumn 2022—I think we should now use the word "indefinitely". That is simply not good enough. Cheltenham has a population of around 120,000 and it serves a much larger area. Since then, Gloucestershire Royal hospital's

maternity services have been downgraded to inadequate. They remain inadequate, and have done for a number of years.

There have been some really worrying bits of casework slipping into my inbox recently, which tells me that things are going wrong and there are ongoing issues with bad bleeds, which has been raised by the CQC. My hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) mentioned the CQC's lag time. The CQC reported in January after a visit last spring, so there is clearly a long delay. I will end there to give my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) a minute, but I hope the Minister can respond on those points and provide an update on what is going on with Gloucestershire Royal hospital's maternity services.

10.29 am

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) for securing the debate. She spoke movingly and eloquently, and reminded everyone that these are not just statistics, but people.

I will make three points very briefly. My hon. Friend the Member for Eastleigh (Liz Jarvis) touched on maternal mental health. As the mental health spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats, I was as shocked as anyone to know that the No. 1 cause of death for women in the 12 months post giving birth is taking their own life. That is tragic, and it is one reason why my team are organising an event in Parliament in April with the group Delivering Better to bring together women who have experienced mental health challenges during pregnancy and after childbirth. The event will provide a platform to share stories, raise awareness and discuss how we can improve support and services for mothers across the country.

I recently attended the 120th anniversary of the vet school at Liverpool, where I went to university. I spoke to the pro-vice-chancellor, Professor Louise Kenny, who is a consultant obstetrician and has done a lot of research on health during gestation and the months after birth, and we discussed the latest research. We have not touched on that today, but I will do so briefly now. Healthy gestation is the foundation of a person's lifelong health, and it has a far greater impact than any lifestyle changes in adulthood. We need to look not just at birth itself, but at the care of the mother before birth—everything from stress to nutrition.

10.31 am

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Christopher. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) for securing this important debate and making such an excellent opening speech, in which she covered most of the ground that we need to cover.

It is important to acknowledge that the vast majority of babies arrive safely, despite the increasing number of complex pregnancies. My own experience of having a baby was 16 years ago, but I am sure that the thousands of women having babies now are having the same experience that I did. The staff of hospital maternity units make you feel simultaneously that you are the most important person ever to have given birth, and

[Helen Morgan]

that you are the umpteenth person to have done so this week, they know exactly what they are doing and you can relax. I felt like that even when everything went wrong, which is a great testament to the professionalism of the staff at Wycombe general hospital all those years ago.

This is one of many debates on maternity services that I have attended in the last three years. The first followed the issuing of Donna Ockenden's report on maternity services in Shrewsbury and Telford hospital trust, which serves my constituents, including Kayleigh and Colin Griffiths, who fought alongside Rhiannon Davies and Richard Stanton and others to give a voice to the many families who suffered as a result of the failings at the trust. But that was not the first scandal in NHS maternity services—Morecambe Bay had already been investigated and reported on by Dr Bill Kirkup—and, tragically, it was not the last either. Dr Kirkup has reviewed significant failings at East Kent, and Donna Ockenden is currently investigating a huge number of incidents at Nottingham. We have also heard the concerns of the hon. Members for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tom Rutland) and for Leeds North West (Katie White) about the state of services in Sussex and Leeds. I am sure that Members across the House are concerned that the tragedy at Shrewsbury and Telford will not be the last.

It makes me quite angry to say that that is not a surprise. We have heard that 65% of trusts were rated inadequate or requiring improvement when it comes to safety in maternity services in the latest CQC survey. That is despite the previous Government's commitments from the Dispatch Box, which I believe were made in good faith, to deal with unsafe staffing levels and bring about cultural change across the country. The lack of action is unacceptable. Donna Ockenden described the Conservative Government as being "asleep at the wheel" when it came to making progress on the 15 immediate and essential actions she recommended for the whole of England in March 2022, despite their having accepted all those actions.

Each of the reviews into these heartbreaking tragedies has found the same recurring themes: poor management of incidents when things go wrong and, critically, a failure to learn from them, which is indicative of defensive management culture and sometimes toxic working arrangements, including a feeling among staff that they do not have the freedom to speak out and, when they do, inadequate protection for whistleblowers; failure to ensure safe and timely assessment at triage; reluctance to acknowledge the need for medicalisation for a C-section when one is in the best interests of the mother; unsuitable estates and a lack of access to equipment, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire); and, underpinning all these issues, unsafe staffing levels.

That last point is really important, because staff are experiencing burnout. They are leaving the service in high numbers, and are unable to deliver the care that they really want to deliver to mothers at their most vulnerable moment. There are no excuses now—the issues have been identified time and again—but there is evidence that we are going backwards on maternity care. The 2015 national maternity safety ambition to

halve rates of stillbirths and neonatal and maternal deaths by 2025 has stalled and is unlikely to be met this year.

There is a shocking disparity of outcomes between different ethnic groups. Black women are more than twice as likely to die than white ones, and other ethnic groups also carry an unacceptably high risk. No one really understands why; there has been no research into it. There are clear links to deprivation, because people in deprived areas also carry a much higher risk, but translation difficulties, certain health conditions and, shamefully, even racism may all play a part in this shocking disparity. The women's health strategy for England proposed to address these disparities, but it is impossible to point to any measurable progress. Poor maternity care can have a devastating impact on families, and it makes no sense for the taxpayer either. As we have heard, 60% of the value of clinical negligence claims is related to maternity services, and that costs more than £1 billion a year. It makes no sense not to address these issues.

It is important to acknowledge the work of charities such as Sands and Tommy's and the work of a number of APPGs in this place over the last few years, including the baby loss, maternity, and birth trauma APPGs, all of which I was involved in. They have campaigned tirelessly for safe staffing levels and to improve care across England, and indeed the UK. This debate relates to England because health is a devolved matter, but the whole of the UK must strive to become the safest place in the world to have a baby.

Addressing disparities in obstetric care is essential for a fair society. The immediate and essential actions of the Ockenden report must be implemented at once, because if they are not, more families will face the trauma of a birth injury or worse. The actions included a commitment to safe staffing, and in 2022 the Government made a significant investment in staffing; it is essential that that is continued. The commitments made in the workforce plan must be backed by adequate funding, and include expansion of the wider maternity and neonatal workforce. The UK Government must renew the national maternity ambitions beyond 2025 to include all four nations, and include a clear baseline to measure progress. They must also address this critical issue of health disparities. In her 2022 report into Shrewsbury and Telford hospital trust, Donna Ockenden said:

"The impact of death or serious health complications suffered as a result of maternity care cannot be underestimated. The impact on the lives of families and loved ones is profound and permanent."

In my first debate on this subject, in March 2022—the day that report was issued—everyone in the Chamber contributing said that the scandal at Shrewsbury and Telford should be the last. It was not. I hope the Minister will today commit to a strategy to ensure that maternity care scandals are ended on the watch of this Government.

10.38 am

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): I am pleased the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) pointed out that many people actually do have a good birth. I think that is really important, as there is a danger we scare potential mothers. There is good-quality care up and down the country, but it could be better.

The hon. Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore) pointed to my work. I never actually served in Redditch in the obs and gynae and the paed's there; my time was done in the early 2010s over at Worcester. One of my favourite times as a doctor was being on the elective C-section list, and seeing the mothers go in, having the music there, and seeing birth after birth. It was fantastic. I also experienced one of the worst things that I have ever had to do as a paediatrician—being handed a lifeless baby and trying to sort that out. Worse still was an emergency C-section after a baby went into the mother's bladder. Both went off to the intensive care units, and I had to go and speak to the father, who was expecting a normal delivery, to tell him what was going on.

This is the reality of what happens, because having a baby does carry inherent risks. What we are talking about here is what we can do to mitigate them. I think that is the heart of what the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) so eloquently set out; this is about the safety of mitigation. Her story about Bendy and Steph will stick with many people, because that is exactly what this House and the NHS should be trying to avoid. The aim should be to mitigate as much risk as we can.

We have also heard talk about breastfeeding and post-partum mental health, which is really important. Those things should form part of a strategy. Not all patients receive a safe and timely assessment when they are being triaged, with instances of phone triage going unanswered and some women discharging themselves before even being seen or picked up, due to the delays. That was backed up by the Care Quality Commission, which found that unsafe practices in triage form the basis of 81% of the enforcement actions issued to providers and were found to be a safety concern in about a third of all inspections.

The hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) pointed to the fantastic quality of care that exists, despite the conditions—we know that 18% of the NHS estate has been described as not fit for purpose and lacking the space for facilities. In my constituency, we have a plan to bring forward an improved maternity centre for Leicestershire. That, too, has been delayed in the future hospitals programme, but at least funding is coming forward to try to deal with that.

Looking at the record of the previous Government, from 2010 to 2022, the rate of stillbirth decreased by 19.3%, the neonatal mortality rate for babies born over 24 weeks gestational age of viability decreased by 36%, and maternal mortality decreased by 17%. In 2015, the then Government launched the national maternity safety ambition, which was to halve the 2010 rates of stillbirth, neonatal and maternal deaths, and brain injuries in babies occurring during or soon after birth by 2025. The current Government have not yet set out an updated ambition for the next decade, so I would appreciate it if the Minister would bring that forward.

As of December 2023, there were 2,361 full-time equivalent midwives working in NHS trusts and other core organisations. That was an increase of 3,700, or 18.9%, since 2010. On the other hand, the birth rate is falling while the number of midwives is rising. I recognise that births are taking place and are somewhat more complex than they used to be, due to things like diabetes,

weight and age. It is really important that we have a plan to deal with that; I hope the Minister will comment on that going forward.

That leads me on to community midwives and continuity of care, which we know is inextricably linked to improved care. A report by Cochrane, a non-profit organisation that produces global research to improve health outcomes, showed that women who experience continuity of care—in other words, seeing the same midwife or teams of midwives in pregnancy—have far better outcomes. During the last Parliament, funding was provided for the implementation of continuity of care models. As of April 2024, an additional £186 million had been allocated to improve the quality of care for mothers and babies and to increase the number of available midwives in post.

I further welcome the £6.8 million in funding provided by the previous Government to help to implement continuity of care for black and ethnic minority groups living in the most deprived areas. As we have heard in the debate, that is a real concern—the hon. Member for Worthing West (Dr Cooper), with her professional experience, pointed to the disparities we see in seeking behaviours among those from BAME backgrounds when it comes to having babies. We also saw that in our work on the Health Committee—I have asked the Minister to look at the two reports on litigation and the Ockenden report in the last Parliament. There is a lot of good cross-party work there that could help to inform current thinking.

Of course, far more remains to be done in the area of saving babies. NHS England published its own delivery plan for maternal and neonatal services in March 2023. Commitments included updating the “Saving babies’ lives” care bundle by 2024 and introducing a national maternity early warning score and updated newborn early warning trigger and tracker to follow up the babies in those cases. The “Saving babies’ lives” care bundle is helping to provide the best practice for providers to reduce neonatal mortality and is rightly a major component of NHS England’s maternal and neonatal services delivery plan. Will the Minister provide an update on the implementation of version 3 of the care bundle?

There are a few closing questions that I would like to pose. The maternal mortality gap has been reduced over the years, from five times to two times, but clearly we need to do more. What further action will the Government take to address the issue of the black and Asian maternal mortality gap, and what ambition will be set out? At the general election, the Government stood on a manifesto to recruit more midwives. Will the Government confirm how that fits into the long-term workforce plan? I am pleased that they have stuck with the previous Government’s plan, and are looking to amend it.

In the new operational planning guidance, NHS England has committed to implementing the key actions in the three-year delivery plan. Will the Minister update us on progress against some of those actions, including the commitment to introduce a national maternity early warning score system and an updated newborn early warning trigger and track tool? As part of their response to the East Kent review, the previous Government established a group overseeing maternity safety services nationwide chaired by my former colleague, Maria Caulfield. Will the Minister provide an update on the national oversight group’s work? Are she or any of her ministerial colleagues part of those discussions?

[Dr Luke Evans]

My final question is about litigation, which was raised by my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash (Jeremy Hunt). Under his chairmanship, the Health and Social Care Committee produced a report looking at different maternity models, including in the likes of Japan, and at how can we reduce the cost for taxpayers while improving clinicians' ability to have the honest discussions we need, and to feel that they can come forward and blow the whistle.

Birth is not about making babies; it is about making mothers—strong, competent and capable ones. We do that by supporting, respecting and informing mothers every step of the way. That is an admirable aim for this House and the NHS, and I look forward to the Minister's comments.

10.46 am

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller) for raising this extremely important issue. It touches so many of our constituents and so many families across our country, and I know how many of them she and other Members have spoken to. As the Secretary of State said, it is an issue that keeps him awake at night. The hon. Lady spoke very movingly about her friend Steph and Steph's son, Bendy, whom I know she remembers very fondly. We have had too many decades of similar stories, but she did good service to her friend and Bendy today.

I will do my best to answer as many questions as possible—it has been a wide-ranging, respectful and thoughtful debate—but the Minister for Patient Safety, Baroness Merron, who leads on this issue for the Department, will be happy to write to colleagues where necessary.

The hon. Member for Chichester asked a number of questions at the end of her speech, and I hope that I will address most of them. I completely understand why she is pushing on behalf of the families that the Secretary of State met for the maternity services plan to be outlined. Families have waited long enough, but we want to make sure we get it right, so we are taking time within the Department to discuss the next steps with officials and ensure that any plans we put out are as strong and effective as possible; we have had too many plans that have not been. Those families will receive an update on the next steps very soon.

I will come on to some of the essential actions from previous reports, but I will re-emphasise that all Donna Ockenden's recommendations were accepted and are being worked on. I will pick up on that later in my speech.

On workforce and training, we will publish in the summer the refreshed long-term workforce plan. That will set out how we will build a transformed health service over the next decade, and obviously it will include midwifery.

Helen Maguire: Will the Minister give way?

Karin Smyth: I will, but I will not be able to get through my speech if I keep giving way.

Helen Maguire: I will be very brief. La Retraite sixth form in London has a T-level qualification in health with midwifery, linked up with Guy's and St Thomas', and it is proving successful. Will the Minister consider working with the Secretary of State for Education to look at rolling that out throughout the country? It is proving really successful in getting new midwives into the system.

Karin Smyth: The hon. Lady raises something very close to my heart. I spoke frequently in opposition about apprenticeships and the need for the health service to work on that. I actually visited that centre with the chief nursing officer and met students there. It was a lovely visit; we had a fantastic morning with really enthusiastic young people who wanted to go into the profession. The hon. Lady makes an excellent point, and we will continue to work with Guy's and St Thomas' on that. Others could take note of what they are doing.

We understand the issues with the CQC. They are well documented and were further highlighted by the hon. Members for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) and for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman). We do not think now is the time to make changes to the statutory limitation power, because we want the CQC to prioritise improving its regulatory approach and focusing resources on the recovery plan in line with the Dash report. Once that is done and the CQC is working better, the Government have committed to reviewing that statute of limitation power.

With regard to phonelines, Sands and Tommy's do fantastic work for bereaved parents across the country—I know that from my own Bristol South constituency. We are always open to new ideas and suggestions from the experience of people working on the ground. I will ask officials to consider recording triage phonelines as part of our longer-term work on maternity and neonatal services. Many hon. Members raised general points about communications. The hon. Member for Chichester was right to mention communication for parents—both mothers and fathers. That was a point well made, and I will pick it up later.

Donna Ockenden rightly commands huge respect across Government, parties and the NHS. She was right to say that previous Governments were “asleep at the wheel” on maternity care. We have heard already, but it is worth restating, that babies of black ethnicity are twice as likely to be stillborn as babies of white ethnicity. The maternity workforce is experiencing significant challenges and safety in maternity care is very far from where we want it to be.

Hon. Members highlighted their meetings with families. The Secretary of State and Baroness Merron have met a number of bereaved families over the past few months, as I know others have done. My hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tom Rutland) talked about the families he has met. He highlighted that when he talked to me recently about issues in his constituency.

As with so many issues in healthcare, there is no quick fix to the challenges we face. There have been too many high-profile independent reviews into maternity services over the past few years. With remarkable consistency, they all point to the same thing: a culture that belittles women, downplays concerns and puts reputations above all else, even patient safety. We know that is wrong and we know what needs to happen. It is now time to crack on and deliver.

We are making steady progress on recommendations from all 15 areas of the Shrewsbury and Telford review, such as workforce accountability and bereavement care. Much of that progress has been made through NHS England's three-year delivery plan. The plan seeks to make maternity and neonatal care safer, fairer and more tailored to every woman's needs, by setting out expectations for informed choice and personalised care planning, to improve women's experience in labour and birth.

Some of the initiatives have been highlighted today. The saving babies' lives care bundle, helping to reduce stillbirths and pre-term births, has been rolled out to every trust in England. I am pleased that all 150 maternity and neonatal units in England have signed up to the perinatal culture and leadership programme, an initiative to promote and sustain a culture of safety. There are also initiatives to reduce inequality. As I know from my constituency, women living in deprived areas are more likely to suffer adverse outcomes. It is right that local systems are trying to bridge the gap through equity and equality action plans.

We have set clear expectations for escalation and accountability through the three-year plan. We are supporting staff to hold up their hands when things go wrong, through the freedom to speak up initiative. The public can monitor the progress of the three-year plan against the Ockenden recommendations, through their local maternity and neonatal systems and integrated care boards. Local women and families, should they choose, can see what progress has been made, who is accountable and how the system is changing. NHS England is also investing £10 million every year to target the 10 most deprived areas of England.

Safety must be the watchword at every step of the journey. NHS Resolution's maternity incentive scheme is rewarding NHS trusts that prove they are taking concrete steps to improve the quality of care for women, families and newborns. As highlighted by the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), since 2010 the neonatal mortality rate has shown steady signs of improvement, decreasing by a quarter for babies born after at least 24 weeks of pregnancy. The stillbirth rate in England has decreased by 22% and the overall rate of brain injuries occurring during or soon after birth has fallen by 3%.

We all know there is so much more to be done to improve outcomes for mothers and babies, and to ensure that they receive the safe care that they need. There are ongoing initiatives to ensure lessons are learned from every tragic event, to prevent similar events in future. Hospitals carry out internal perinatal mortality reviews, which aim to provide answers for bereaved parents about why their baby died, and give them some closure. The reviews also help hospitals to improve care and ensure we learn the lessons from every tragedy.

The maternity and newborn safety investigations programme conducts independent investigations of early neonatal deaths, intrapartum stillbirths and severe brain injury in babies after labour. All NHS trusts are required to report those incidents, carry out an independent investigation and make safety recommendations to improve services in future. For those parents who go through the heartbreak of losing a baby, we must do everything we can to support them in their grief. That is why the Government extended the baby loss certificates; as of

last week, we have issued almost 100,000 to grieving parents. It is also why, through the three-year plan, we have made provision for seven-day bereavement care supported by investment, and why we will continue to support the work of Sands and Tommy's, which do so much for bereaved mums and dads across the UK.

The hon. Member for Chichester rightly talked about the importance of workforce and meeting safe levels of staffing. Throughout the winter I have seen up close NHS staff doing their absolute best in appalling circumstances that were not of their own making. I know that however dedicated our NHS staff may be, they cannot provide the right care without the right support. That is why we are committed to tackling the retention and recruitment challenges in the NHS, and why work is under way to modernise NHS working cultures and make our hospitals more attractive for top talent. That includes a much stronger focus on health and wellbeing, more support for flexible working and a renewed commitment to tackling inequality and discrimination.

Bringing in the staff that we need will take time, but it is an absolute priority for this Government and for me personally. NHS England is leading a range of initiatives to boost retention of existing staff and ensure the NHS remains an attractive career choice for new recruits. I say to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that we are keen to work with all devolved Governments to ensure that and to share learning.

There is a dedicated programme for the retention of midwives, an issue highlighted by the hon. Member for Chichester and my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Josh Fenton-Glynn). The initiative contains a range of measures, including a midwifery and nursing retention self-assessment tool, mentoring schemes, strengthened advice and support on pensions, and the embedding of flexible retirement options.

NHS England has also invested in retention leads for every maternity ward. Alongside investment in workforce capacity, that has shown promising signs of bringing down vacancy, leaver and turnover rates. The leaver rate declined from 10.3% in September 2023 to 9% in September last year. There has been progress, but we know that there is more to be done. As of November, there were a record number of midwives working in NHS trusts, with around 24,700 working full time, up by over 1,300 compared with the year before.

While all this work is going on, we are also doing the hard yards of fixing the foundations of our NHS and making it fit for the future. I am pleased that the National Institute for Health and Care Research has commissioned over 40 studies looking at how we can prevent pre-term births and improve care for babies and women. It has launched a £50 million funding call, challenging researchers and policymakers to come up with new ways of tackling maternity inequalities and poor pregnancy outcomes.

While that work is going on, we will continue to talk to staff about the 10-year plan. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is attending a staff event in Peterborough on Thursday, and I will be attending one next week. We want to know how we can better support our staff, ensure we unleash their potential and give patients the care they need. A central part of the 10-year plan will be our workforce—how we train them and provide the staff, technology and infrastructure the NHS needs to care for patients across our communities.

[Karin Smyth]

The hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) is right to highlight the estate, which is also a problem in this area. We need to consider all policies, including those that impact maternity and neonatal care.

Over 95,000 people have responded to the consultation so far, and we want to hear from more. We have heard in this debate about midwifery-led care from my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson), and about mental health support from the hon. Members for Eastleigh (Liz Jarvis), for Winchester (Dr Chambers) and for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed). I hope that they contribute to the consultation.

I am conscious that I need to give the hon. Member for Chichester a few moments to wind up. We know that we will not be able to fix these issues overnight. We are committed to investing in safety, workforce retention and tackling inequalities, and we are making steady progress. As was highlighted, most women have safe care with a healthy baby, and are made to feel special at a very special moment. That is a testament to the staff. We need to make sure that that happens for all women, everywhere. A lot of work has been done. There is a lot left to be done, but I am confident that we will build a maternity and neonatal system that delivers for every woman.

10.58 am

Jess Brown-Fuller: I thank all Members from across the House for their constructive approach to the debate. It is clearly an area where there is passion in all parts of the House. I thank the Minister for her replies to the questions, and I am sure that a lot of Members will be writing follow-up letters to Baroness Merron asking for further detail on particular areas. I will forgive the Minister for her “crack on and deliver” pun.

The Minister mentioned that lessons are learned from every tragic event. I will finish by saying that the parents I spoke to did not feel like lessons were being learned from their tragic events, because nobody was asking them what had happened. If just one thing comes out of this debate, let us send this message to all NHS trusts and ICBs: “When there are tragic events, please don’t cover them up. Please contact the parents, because they want to talk to you and they want to make it better for parents in the future and the babies that we lost too soon.”

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered maternity services.

Thameslink Train Services

11 am

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the performance of Thameslink train services.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. Many of my constituents in Mid Bedfordshire rely on Thameslink services on the Bedford line to get to work or get into London for leisure. About 1.5 million passengers use Harlington and Flitwick stations in my constituency each year to meet friends, go shopping and take advantage of everything our capital has to offer. Commuters from the Flitwick and Harlington stations might also take advantage of the convenient connection that Thameslink offers to our local airport in Luton, or perhaps use the Thameslink direct connections to Gatwick airport, slightly further afield.

I have spent much of my career commuting to work on Thameslink services, so I know that many constituents in the eastern part of Mid Bedfordshire also rely on services from the Arlesey and Hitchin stations on the east coast main line, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Hitchin (Alistair Strathern), and many others use Thameslink services from stations including Bedford, Leagrave and Luton.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate. Like him, I have been a regular users of the Thameslink services in his constituency and mine, and, like many of my constituents, I have been consistently let down. My constituents’ two most common bugbears are the lack of drivers, which means that Thameslink cannot consistently put on the services it advertises—that seems the bare minimum—and the fact that when services go wrong, the emergency routes home via taxis and buses, which are so important in rural communities such as ours, are an afterthought. Does he agree that securing sufficient drivers for the line and getting back to putting passengers at the heart of our rail operations will be fundamental to delivering the rail services that my communities and his desperately need?

Blake Stephenson: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I thank him for joining this important debate for the communities across Bedfordshire that rely heavily on rail services for leisure and work. The disruption is also having a huge impact on our economy; I will come to that later in my speech.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Blake Stephenson: Very briefly—it is only a half-hour debate.

Jim Shannon: I commend the hon. Gentleman for the work he has done for disabled people who use trains regularly. That should be happening everywhere in this great United Kingdom. Does he agree that disabled people—those who are in wheelchairs, and those who have mobility or vision issues—deserve the same quality of service no matter where they are in this United Kingdom?

Blake Stephenson: I could not agree more. Later, I will talk about the need for step-free access to Harlington and Flitwick stations, but that is necessary right across the country for the reasons the hon. Gentleman has set out.

In this debate, I will focus on the Thameslink services on the Bedford line and east coast main line, which my constituents use regularly. Since I first moved to Mid Bedfordshire more than a decade ago, I have been a regular user of Thameslink, but it feels to me and many of the constituents I speak to about it that something has gone wrong. Overcrowded, standing-room-only carriages have become the norm. Too often, the timetable is merely a guideline, not a rulebook for when trains will arrive. We pay more and more each year for services that deliver less and less: a season ticket from Flitwick into Farringdon costs about £5,500 per year.

When this debate was selected, I launched a survey of local residents to hear about their experiences of travel on Thameslink. Fifty-seven per cent of respondents told me that they thought the service is poor, 80% told me that they had been impacted by a cancellation in the past month, and 88% told me that they had experienced a delay of more than 10 minutes. Those are not healthy statistics. I want to share some of the things that people in Mid Bedfordshire told me about the impact that the poor service is having on them. Callum from Flitwick told me:

“Trains are subject to delays or cancellations at very short notice. On one occasion I was on the platform and the train was cancelled with only one or two minutes’ notice before it was due to arrive, even though Thameslink must have known it hadn’t left the previous station (Bedford) at least 10 minutes before it was due to arrive at Flitwick.”

Tracey from Haynes would happily use the train from Flitwick to Gatwick, but it is too unreliable; they have to use the car instead. Kate told me that despite travelling just once or twice a week, she has had to make five delay repay claims in the past month. Stephanie from Flitwick told me:

“This train service is appalling. We very nearly missed our eurostar despite leaving hours to spare. It’s got the stage that we dread using the service and are always worried about being stranded in London.”

Ginette from Maulden noted:

“Flitwick is often cancelled as a return stop from London where there have been delays. This is usually only advised once we are on the train leading to frustrated passengers disembarking at Luton.”

I hope that these examples of the hundreds of comments that I have received from residents make the problem clear. Too often, Thameslink services are unreliable, late or cancelled, and too often my constituents are stranded when their stop is cancelled while they are sat on a Thameslink train. Too often, taking the train is simply not an option for people in Mid Bedfordshire. It should not be this way. For commuters in Flitwick and Harlington, the frustration of unreliable services is compounded by the frustration caused by Network Rail’s failure to deliver step-free access programmes at pace. If we want people to use the train, we must make it easier for them to do so.

For too long, things have not been getting better. In 2008, a commuter getting the 7.41 am train from Flitwick could expect to arrive at London St Pancras at 8.32 am. Nearly 20 years later, the timetable has no more stations,

but commuters on the 7.41 am from Flitwick can expect to arrive at St Pancras two minutes later, at 8.34 am—and that is when the trains arrive on time. Too often, they do not arrive at all. In the past 100 days, 11% of the 7.41 am services from Flitwick have been cancelled, and 25% have arrived at St Pancras more than five minutes late. That compares reasonably favourably with the 7.43 am service, which has been cancelled 28% of the time and has arrived late 42% of the time. That is simply not good enough.

That is just the morning commute. The best performing return journey from St Pancras to Flitwick between 5 pm and 6.30 pm has been more than five minutes late 23% of the time in the past 100 days. For commuters in Harlington, the evening peak period sees three services that are more than five minutes late 50% or more of the time—three evening services more than five minutes late every other time a commuter uses them—and one service that is cancelled more than a quarter of the time.

We must do better than this, and we can. Investment through the Thameslink programme under the previous Government has seen the travel times from Arlesey to St Pancras drop from 47 minutes in 2008 to 40 minutes now. Here, at least, services have become much more convenient, with trains now running beyond St Pancras and into south London—and beyond. Of course, even here there have been problems with delays and cancellations, as the hon. Member for Hitchin knows too well, and the east coast main line section of Thameslink will face its own pressures, which I will address later.

The picture I have painted is of an underperforming service that is letting my constituents down, and I could cite plenty of other statistics to back that up. This matters to my constituents, who suffer the inconvenience of the service in their daily lives, but it should matter to the Government, in the big picture sense, too. Quick, reliable trains into London help us to improve UK productivity, with fewer working hours lost on station platforms and more workers at their desks, growing the economy. They also allow for better economic ties between places such as Mid Bedfordshire and our capital, and make it easier for local people to set up and run growing businesses. That helps to deliver on the Government’s mission for economic growth.

A well-performing Thameslink service is also vital to supporting the economic growth of the Oxford to Cambridge growth corridor, which is one of this Government’s central missions. Thameslink services already link London to Cambridge, but they will one day also link London with East West Rail at Cambridge, Tempsford and Bedford. If we want to maximise the return on investment of that infrastructure project, its connections into the wider train network need to be fast and reliable.

That takes me nicely to the next section of my speech. As an outcome from this debate, I would like to see not just a strategy to improve the Thameslink services we have today, but one that starts thinking about the Thameslink services we will need for tomorrow. On the Thameslink line, we have already seen the booming success that new onward connections can bring. Farringdon station, which is on the Elizabeth line, served just over 4.6 million passengers in 2010; today it serves 10 times that number. We know that Thameslink faces significant future pressures. If those pressures have even a fifth of the impact that the Elizabeth line has had on Farringdon, we will need to see serious forward planning to ensure

[Blake Stephenson]

that commuters travelling to and from Mid Bedfordshire can benefit from sufficient capacity to enjoy comfortable commutes.

Take the Bedford line specifically. In relatively short order, it could see additional pressure from Luton airport expansion, a Universal theme park at Kempston Hardwick, an interchange with East West Rail, a rail freight interchange in Sundon, and more than 10,000 more houses in my constituency of Mid Bedfordshire alone. I hope that within the next decade, we might see the Ryder cup come to Luton Hoo, bringing with it huge opportunities but also considerable pressures on the local transport network.

If we are to ensure that comfortable travel on the Bedford line is the norm and not the exception—I do not think that is too much to aspire to—then we must start doing the long-term legwork now to put the capacity in place, because at the moment the capacity is simply not there. Overcrowded trains at peak times are now the norm, not the exception. The timetable shows that. Anyone who goes on the Thameslink website will see that the vast majority of morning and evening commuter services are filled with the red of standing-room-only trains.

We need more capacity now so that my constituents do not have to resign themselves to a cramped, standing commute every day. However, we particularly need more capacity on the Bedford line to cope with the challenges of tomorrow. Do not misunderstand me; I know that work is already being done on that. I met with people from Thameslink recently and I set out some of the challenges that my constituents and I foresee arising over the coming years. I know from my discussions with the Mayor of Bedford that significant progress is being made on the construction of Wixams station, which will serve the new town of Wixams in my constituency. However, with the Government pressing ahead with their nationalisation agenda, it will be Ministers who will oversee much of the future planning in that area, so it is incumbent on Ministers to understand the challenges and opportunities facing our communities.

It is so important that we get it right. It is important for commuters using the stations at Flitwick, Harlington and, hopefully soon, Wixams to get into work in the morning. It is important for all the growing businesses in Mid Bedfordshire, which rely on a good rail connection to do business in London and across our region. It is also vital for the Government's growth agenda.

If we want to take advantage of the potential expansion of Luton airport, and use it to grow the economy, we must get people there comfortably and quickly. If we want to get the best bang for the taxpayer's buck on East West Rail, we need a Thameslink service that is reliable enough for people to be able to count on making their connection train at Bedford. If we want to take advantage of the economic game changer that is the planned Universal theme park at Kempston Hardwick, we must provide sufficient transport capacity to get people there. More generally, if we would like to grow the tourism economy in Bedfordshire, as I would, a Thameslink service that works is a vital part of the jigsaw. People will not visit our towns and villages, spend money in our shops or enjoy a pint in our pubs if we make the process of getting there difficult and uncomfortable.

Of course, as I said earlier, it is not just the Bedford line that my constituents in Mid Bedfordshire rely on; for many commuters in the eastern part of my constituency, the Thameslink services at Arlesey and Hitchin play a crucial role in their daily commutes. That line is not immune from pressures of its own. Planned housing growth, all the way down the line, will have a significant impact on capacity pressures over the coming years, as will the line's own interchange with East West Rail at Tempsford and the potential housing growth that the Government might like to put forward there. Significant development at Tempsford would require concentrated efforts to increase capacity, in particular to avoid services into London becoming standing room only further down the line.

Any increase in capacity on that line is made much more challenging by the limitations placed on the services by the Digswell viaduct and Welwyn North station, where the line bottlenecks and drops from four tracks to two. When Ministers take full control over the services on that line, they will need to have a plan for how the network will cope with the future development plans being pushed forward elsewhere in Government.

As I conclude, I will touch on the Government's plan for rail nationalisation. I say "plan", but at the moment I am unclear whether that is the right word. If I have understood correctly the various announcements made so far on rail, the Government will be nationalising Govia Thameslink, but they cannot say when they will do that. There will be a central, unified rail system under Great British Railways, except in areas where mayors have requested rail powers under English devolution plans. Great British Railways will be directly accountable to Ministers and mayors, but there will also be a new quango, the rail watchdog, presumably to make sure that Ministers and mayors are doing their job and improving passenger experience. The watchdog will refer poor performance to a regulator, not Ministers. The Labour party's manifesto set out that one focus of nationalisation was affordability, but Ministers are now briefing that the savings are minimal and fares are likely to keep going up.

My constituents need a clear plan to improve our rail network. So far, it is far from clear how, if at all, the Government's renationalisation plans will do that. I look forward to hearing the Minister set out exactly how they plan to make services more reliable, to expand capacity and to keep fares down, now and in the future. That is what our constituents deserve from the Government.

11.16 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Christopher. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) on securing the debate and providing this opportunity to discuss the performance of Thameslink services, and I thank the hon. Members who interjected to make points, which I will try to address in my response.

The Government recognise the crucial role that the rail network plays in supporting economic development, housing and employment growth, tourism, and environmental benefits. That is why we have made fixing Britain's railway our top transport priority. We need to improve services for passengers and deliver better value for money for the taxpayer.

I recognise that performance on Thameslink, operated by Govia Thameslink Railway, has not been where we expect it to be, and passengers deserve better. Thameslink passengers have faced recent disruption caused by a variety of Network Rail infrastructure incidents, as well as a high level of cancellations due to train crew availability, particularly during the final few months of last year. I know that cancellations, especially those made close to the time of travel, can be very inconvenient for passengers, disrupting their lives and making it difficult for them to travel with confidence.

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): Just this morning, commuters in Ashwell in North East Hertfordshire, which is also served by Thameslink, wrote to me about the challenges that they are experiencing because of a lack of reliability and expensive fares on the line, and how those challenges are increasingly cutting them off from work and education opportunities. Could my hon. Friend the Minister address what steps the Government will take to improve fares and reliability on those routes as they bring Thameslink into public ownership?

Simon Lightwood: We are rewiring Britain's railways to end decades of poor service, waste and timetable chaos. A unified, simplified railway will put passengers first, raise living standards and boost growth, as part of our plan for change. We will hear more about that when the railways Bill comes before Parliament.

Disruption due to train crew availability remains a priority for my Department. The Department's officials are closely monitoring train crew availability levels and the actions that GTR is taking to improve, which will provide greater resilience in this area. I am pleased that there has been some improved performance in that area this year, but that must be sustained and improved on further. The Department has also commissioned work to understand, in detail, the impact of train crew availability on performance. That will look at issues such as staffing levels, recruitment, training, overtime and planning efficiency. It will outline recommendations to address those issues in the short, medium and long term.

On disruption due to infrastructure incidents, GTR and Network Rail continue to work closely to improve the reliability of the infrastructure used by Thameslink services to help to reduce associated delays and cancellations. A programme is currently under way to upgrade the overhead wires on the midland main line, and the

central London Thameslink core had most of its rails replaced over the Christmas break, which will help to prevent track faults.

The Government are focused on restoring rail performance. We have been clear that rail services have been failing our passengers. The Rail Minister has met GTR and Network Rail to ensure that they are delivering on their plans to address Thameslink's poor performance. Department officials, the Rail Minister and I will continue to closely review Thameslink's progress for a sustained recovery in performance to deliver the punctual, reliable services that passengers and taxpayers deserve.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I apologise for being an interloper from the west midlands. The Minister rightly and importantly mentioned passengers being failed, but the fragmentation of our network has meant that we have been failing not only passengers but businesses, particularly those that want to invest in constituencies such as Redditch. Improved services are improved not only for passengers but for businesses deciding where they may relocate and invest.

Simon Lightwood: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We must ensure that passengers are at the core of what we deliver, but the knock-on effect on businesses is also important. GBR will also focus on freight: how do we get some of the cargo transported by our roads on to our trains?

My hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin (Alistair Strathern) talked about the need for more train crew. GTR is particularly vulnerable to the effect of train crew availability issues—the problem tends to be the availability, rather than the number, of train crew—and of all Thameslink's cancellations, 50% are attributed to train crew. That is largely due to historical terms and conditions and legacy agreements that mean that there is a high level of reliance on rest-day working.

I will close by confirming that this Government will continue to put passengers at the heart of what we do and deliver a railway of which, in its 200th year, we can be proud once again. I thank the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire again and acknowledge the importance of this matter to him and his constituents.

Question put and agreed to.

11.22 am

Sitting suspended.

SEND Education Support

[DEREK TWIGG *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered SEND education support.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I am grateful for having secured this important debate, and welcome the opportunity to discuss special educational needs and disabilities support, especially how it is failing and how it can be improved. I am pleased too that so many Members are present to contribute. I have no doubt that those MPs who, like me, are new to this House will have been blown away by the scale of the SEND crisis in their constituencies. Parents are quite literally crying out for help, and we must listen to them and act.

In this debate we will hear about the national crisis, as well as the many local failures experienced right across the country, and the devastating human impacts that the crisis is having on young people and their families. But while I have the Minister's attention, and before I get into the detail, I want to set out two important points. First, tackling our nation's SEND crisis must be a national priority—much like rebuilding our NHS or tackling the housing crisis. We must be determined to rebuild our SEND support as a nation, and build a system that works for our children. Sitting alongside that, we must plan for the sustainable funding of the SEND system.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): SEND children are falling through the cracks. I have been told by a school in my constituency that it is experiencing a crisis, and is self-funding its own education, health and care needs assessments. As a result, it is facing an incredible deficit in funding. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is crucial for the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education to work together to deliver EHC assessments to ensure that our schools do not end up in unsustainable financial positions?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: I agree, and I will talk about those points later in my speech.

Secondly, I will highlight the severe challenges for SEND that are faced in rural areas, such as my constituency of Suffolk Coastal. I am keen that the Minister visits my rural constituency to see, up close and at first hand, how rural education and the rural SEND crisis differs from that of our urban neighbours.

Let me start today's debate by setting out the scale of the SEND crisis. As the recent report from the National Audit Office highlighted, the crisis is severe and growing. There has been a 140% increase in children with education, health and care plans—or an equivalent statement of SEND needs—from 2015 to 2024. The total number of children and young people with SEND today is estimated to be 1.9 million. Despite that growth in demand, the NAO has raised real concerns that there has been no consistent improvement in outcomes for children and young people with SEND since 2019. Without drastic action, a full belt-and-braces review of SEND and a real determination to see improvements, we will only see SEND provision get even worse.

Funding is one part of the problem. With growing demand we need a sustainable funding plan—one that is able to tackle, and grow with, that demand—but, much like the issues facing our NHS, the answer does not lie just in funding. We need a belt-and-braces review that seeks to get to the heart of the challenges and build provision around current and future needs. I would like to see a national conversation about SEND, bringing in the voices of parents and young people and giving them the opportunity to share their experiences. Far too many families and young people have felt marginalised, silenced and kicked to the sidelines when they have battled hard to get the support their children are entitled to.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): In 2023, a report by Warwickshire county council revealed that only 9% of education, health and care plans in Warwickshire go to children with special needs in North Warwickshire, compared with 31% in Warwick, which has a lower rate of child poverty. A year later, Conservative Warwickshire county councillors made derogatory comments about SEND children and their parents. I am concerned about the effect of those councillors' attitudes on the provision of support for SEND children across the county, especially in more deprived areas such as mine. Is my hon. Friend concerned that this is an example of a trend across the country, where families in more deprived areas are unable to get the support they need?

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that they need to be succinct and short with interventions.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: I thank my hon. Friend for her timely intervention. I am about to give a similar example from my area. In Suffolk, the county council has failed to deliver 60% of outstanding care plans for SEND within the 20-week timeframe. Compare that with the national average of 50% and we can see that Suffolk is struggling.

The recent Care Quality Commission report for Suffolk, published last year, identified

“widespread and/or systemic failings”

across the local area partnership. It has the lowest possible rating, which means that the inspection identified failings that have

“a significant negative impact on the experiences and outcomes of children and young people”.

Suffolk county council responded with a blueprint, published in January this year, which it says is a forensic road map for change, but, as we sit here, there are parents in Suffolk and across the country who have been let down and are in desperate need of help. In January, I launched a survey in Suffolk Coastal asking parents and young people to share their experiences. That survey has shown some awful and tragic statistics, laying bare the true toll on families and young people of the SEND crisis in Suffolk.

More than 100 families from Suffolk Coastal filled in my survey and the report will be out next month. I would like to share some of that detail now. More than 50% of the children who filled in the survey have missed out on school because their SEND needs could not be met; 13% have been off school for more than a year. The impact that is having on young people's education

cannot be overstated. More than 30% who responded did not have an up-to-date EHCP in place, and one in 10 had been waiting more than a year to get that EHCP.

Six parents who responded to my survey have had to take their cases to a tribunal to attempt to get their children the right SEND provision. Many told me that they have had to use their personal savings, borrow money from friends and family or take out a loan to pay for legal support they need. That cannot be fair or right.

Mr James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. She speaks to the heart of the issue. It is often only people with the means, resources and time who can become experts in the service they are trying to access, a right that is enshrined in the Children and Families Act 2014. Will she join me in encouraging the Government's instinct that, in moving to a more inclusive mainstream education system, we cannot simply say, "Everyone in," without protecting the necessary resources centrally when we issue those instructions?

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): Order. As time is tight, I remind Members to keep interventions succinct.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I believe it should be part of a wider conversation that includes today's debate, and I hope the Minister will respond to it.

I submitted a freedom of information request to Suffolk county council and received information back yesterday. Over the past five years, between 2019 and 2024, 920 appeals were logged against Suffolk county council. It has not told me how many of those went to tribunal, but it did supply the breakdown of the figures. Except for a drop in 2020, which I suspect can be accounted for by the covid lockdown, the numbers have risen year on year. In 2019, there were 103 cases, and by 2024, there were 286 cases. The most staggering fact my survey revealed is the cost of the crisis to families. More than one in two families told me that the SEND crisis is affecting their families' mental health. They are struggling as they battle to provide their children with the support they are entitled to.

I have two examples of families in my constituency. The first is that of Jacob, who is an example of how hard the situation is for so many parents in Suffolk Coastal. His parents are incredible, working two jobs each. They are young and doing everything in their power to provide for him. Jacob is just four and is already being let down. He has autistic spectrum disorder—ASD—and, though he has an EHCP in place, his parents have to fight "tooth and nail" to attempt to get him to the right school.

As his dad told me,

"We don't choose to be parents of a child with SEN. However, this is our child, and I feel he is being treated like a number rather than a human being."

It is equally tragic to say that Jacob has had a head start in many ways, because he has an up-to-date EHCP in place. I could tell countless harrowing stories about the delays and issues that parents in my constituency face just to get an EHCP completed.

The way the system is failing our children is equally highlighted by my constituent Tiffany, a young girl in year 6—another student with a brilliant mum advocating for her. She has struggled in the extreme with mental

health issues. She has missed out on schooling for two years as she battled a serious and severe mental health breakdown, which caused her to spend long periods in hospital, all before she turned 10. It should be no surprise that, while she was battling for her health, she lost out on schooling. Despite having an up-to-date EHCP, she has been told that she cannot stay in the special school that has accepted her because she is too far behind academically. Somewhat absurdly, she is now expected to enter mainstream education in year 7, despite all the challenges that she has faced. Her mum asked me:

"Why should anyone with mental health issues be denied the support they require to access an education?"

I could give many more heartbreaking examples, but I want to give others Members time to do the same. Before I end, let me highlight again the complexities of SEND in rural areas such as my constituency of Suffolk Coastal. Rural areas are made up of small villages and tiny market towns. Such schools often teach mixed age groups, and teachers work across more than one year group. In one of my schools, years 6, 5, 4 and 3 are taught together. The transition from a tiny primary to a very large secondary school can be incredibly challenging for a child with SEND—or indeed any child. That produces a spike of SEND cases in year 7. Our SEND provision should therefore take the challenges in rural areas into consideration, and help schools and children with the transition from primary to secondary school. There are some great examples in my constituency of secondary schools working with feeder village schools from years 5 and 6 to try to bridge that transition and directly target children with SEND during that process.

Patrick Spencer (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): For those who do not know, the hon. Lady is my constituency neighbour in Suffolk, and I think she is doing a fantastic job of highlighting the complexities faced by people such as Jacob and Tiffany—I see them in my inbox too. She has done a fantastic job of talking about the problems, and she is beginning to talk about the solutions. What does she think about universal early intervention programmes, which have been demonstrated to reduce cost at the acute end of the system in the long term? Will she join me in pushing for universal access to early language programmes in schools in Suffolk?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. The example of Jacob, a small boy aged just four, shows that interventions need to happen in the early years—right from the very start.

The model of secondary schools working with primary schools should be looked at nationally. I again call on the Minister to visit Suffolk Coastal to see that in greater detail.

Several hon. Members rose—

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): Order. A lot of Members want to speak, so I will have to impose a time limit. I will first call Iain Duncan Smith, and then could Members bob for a few seconds longer than they would normally so that we can get everybody's name on the list?

2.43 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): It is very good to see you in the Chair, Mr Twigg. I will obey your strictures and try to keep

[Sir Iain Duncan Smith]

this brief. I want to focus on a very narrow aspect of special educational needs. I congratulate the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter) on securing this debate. As we can see, many Members have issues with the supply of SEND education support.

I want to focus on something that originated in a special educational needs school in my constituency called Whitefield, which has calming rooms. I have been to see the Education Secretary about this issue, because I discovered, thanks to a BBC programme, that there is no regulation as to the nature of calming rooms in special educational needs schools and what happens in them. For the most part, those schools are very good, but when it comes to calming rooms there is a big variety of capability and, for that matter, quality. Children in that school were locked away in calming rooms. I would have thought that that was illegal, but it is not in special educational needs schools. What happens in those rooms makes the children's behaviour worse. If they are suffering in one way or another, that suffering gets worse, particularly when they suffer from autism. What happens in those rooms becomes abusive, as has been captured on video.

A survey has shown that more than 500 schools use this kind of lock-in for children with severe autism. The videos I have seen show some of them in cages, and some of them being put in what we would consider to be padded cells, with no visits for long periods of time.

I simply want to put this point to the Minister. I have seen the Secretary of State and put it to her that this issue needs to be looked at and embraced in some kind of guidance or regulation, so that the rooms, if they have to be used, are used sparingly, and that there are regulations about the times that people should visit, to make sure that children are okay in them. Frankly, the rooms should be an absolute last resort, and should be used only very briefly. They are now definitely being abused in different schools. That is the one point I want to make.

I ask the Minister to take this issue up again with the Secretary of State, so that at the next legislative opportunity, Ministers can sit down and figure out how we regulate this. These children often have no voice for themselves, for obvious reasons, and their parents now find their behaviour even worse, and do not know whether their children have been locked into a calming room, such as I have seen and been horrified by. We must make that change so that those with very severe autism who go to special needs schools will not have to suffer as though they were criminals or prisoners—and in ways that we would not even treat those.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): Order. Before I call Andrew Lewin, I will put an advisory two-minute limit on speeches. If that is not followed, I will impose a two-minute limit. I am sure colleagues will want to ensure that time is available for all others present.

2.47 pm

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): It is the nature of being an MP that we are rightly expected to manage a wide range of issues, but one constant since being elected has been the frequency with which I have

been contacted by constituents about the crisis in SEND provision. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter) on being a champion for families in her constituency, and I am pleased that she has secured this debate.

The themes are consistent: extremely long turnaround times to obtain an EHCP, compounded by even longer waiting times to secure a place at a desired school, and exasperated parents who are leaving employment to care for children who have not been found a place in the system. Most important of all, far too many children are suffering because the right support is not being made available to them. Constituents told me of a case in which Hertfordshire county council allocated a family seven different officers in the time it took to finalise a place for an EHCP. Another story was of a parent who had no choice but to give up their job to become a full-time carer for their child, as they wait for an appropriate school place. I could recite countless more examples from Welwyn Hatfield. My message to all local families is that we need concerted action at both local and national level to turn around the system.

I am conscious of the little time that I have today, so I put on the record how pleased I am that this Labour Government have recognised the scale of the challenge and made a £1 billion commitment to SEND across the country. It is imperative that Hertfordshire receives our fair share of that money. What gives me confidence is having met all the local school leaders who are doing everything in their power to help, from specialist providers at Lakeside and James Marks academy in Welwyn Garden City to Southfield school in Hatfield. The changes they are making are a source of hope, but we all have a moral imperative to turn the situation around both locally and nationally.

2.49 pm

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter) on securing this hugely important debate.

As has just been noted, this is an issue about which we all receive a huge amount of correspondence every day, from parents who are at their wits' end. Supporting children and young people with special educational needs is not an act of charity; it is a fundamental responsibility of government, and yet we find that parents are repeatedly battling to access the complicated system. I will briefly give an overview of Dr Warwick-Sanders, a constituent I met in Winchester recently. He is a psychiatrist and his wife is also a medical professional. Their son was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in 2002 and referred to the child and adolescent mental health service. Despite being medical professionals, they said that they just did not know where to turn for help. Although CAMHS is the cornerstone for child mental health services, it has a shocking 150 week wait in our area. Dr Warwick-Sanders' son is stuck in a system where the ADHD medication he needs is out of reach until an assessment is completed. He said, "If medical professionals like me cannot navigate the system, what hope do others have?"

If we are to give every child the opportunity to reach their full potential, we must prioritise our investment in SEND services. My question for the Minister is, how do we streamline this process for accessing support so that

everyone—including medical professionals, but also people who have no experience of dealing with such organisations—can get the help they need, when they need it?

2.51 pm

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter) on continuing to keep this important issue on the parliamentary agenda. For many of us, this is a defining issue that motivated us to stand for election; to try and bring about meaningful change on behalf of SEND families who are living with a constant fight for recognition of the challenges they face, for a diagnosis, for mental health support and for the right educational setting.

I could use double or triple my speaking time today describing the cases that come across my desk week after week of children who are not just struggling to get the right support today, but whose lives could have been different if their needs had been identified and met early. Instead, I am going to go through some of the things that I believe—and that parents and professionals I have met with over the last eight months believe—will make the difference and start to bring this broken system under control. I will limit myself to two things, and I hope the Minister will respond and take it as read that I welcome the steps she has already taken to deliver a more inclusive system.

First, there is much more to be done in partnership with the NHS. The time it takes to get a diagnosis for autism or ADHD varies wildly across the country and has vastly increased in recent years. Meanwhile, access to child and adolescent mental health services is now being rationed in a way that means only the most serious referrals are expected, with the perverse effect that children who are not seen get worse. There will be no fix to the SEND crisis that does not also address the crisis in CAMHS, so I urge the Minister to continue to work closely with her colleagues in the Department for Health and Social Care and get school-based mental health support rolled out as quickly as possible.

Secondly, although the fix to the SEND crisis is not all about money, that does not mean that money does not need to be spent—particularly on capital. The reality is, although we need more inclusivity, we also need co-located provision in mainstream schools and more alternative provision. In my constituency in particular, we have a big shortage in specialist social, emotional and mental health difficulties places which is affecting life chances today—the cost of which will be borne by other parts of the state in future.

2.53 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I congratulate the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter) on so passionately describing the issues for her constituents—but these are replicated for all of us. I will give some statistics from Northern Ireland to add to the support that I give to the hon. Lady and others. There are some 11,000 children in special education—an increase of 70% in the past 10 years—and 8% of those children have special educational needs.

I do not know how many meetings I have attended with parents who are worried about their children. It has become an incredibly important issue. It is a mammoth

take for the Minister here—it is good to see her in her place and I wish her well—as it is a mammoth take for those back home as well. I honestly believe that every child is a precious gift from God, born with a unique personality and a purpose to fulfil—each is valued, is important and matters. That is why I support the Minister in coming forward.

I want to put it on the record that the Education Department in Northern Ireland, which I represent, has committed to a vision where,

“Every child and young person is happy, learning and succeeding.”

That aspiration is no different for our children who face additional challenges to accessing learning. Reform is urgent and essential to deliver that vision, ensure inclusion, and improve outcomes for learners who require additional support. The SEN reform agenda is an ambitious framework for change and takes a whole-system approach to tackling the issues underpinning current challenges in the system.

What do we need? We need two things: first, early diagnosis for those who have educational issues, and secondly, plenty of staff members who can take on the issues and can respond quickly. My request to the Minister is—I know she probably does this without me asking her—will she discuss with our Education Minister back home to see how best we can deliver this for all of those in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland? That was a five-minute speech done in two minutes.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): Thank you for keeping to the two minutes, more or less. We should continue that trend.

2.55 pm

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. Last week, I had the privilege and opportunity to meet with the parents of some students from Hexham Priory school, which supports children with severe learning disabilities in my constituency in the county of Northumberland. One thing that comes to mind when speaking to those parents—as one of them put it to me—is that they are constantly fighting for their child, not just for their education, but for their ability to access swimming pools, leisure centres and other provision that we all take for granted when we are speaking to other children in our constituency.

Sarah Smith (Hyndburn) (Lab): On that point, I want to emphasise that the parents and carers who I speak to in Hyndburn and Haslingden are bruised and burnt out—my hon. Friend talked about the constant fight and the adversarial nature of the system. I also keep hearing concerns from the parents and teachers in the system about some fear around the reforms that are coming, because they feel that might happen without them. Would my hon. Friend agree that is really important that the Government work with parents, teachers and carers as they develop those reforms, and that there is a real two-way conversation as we bring forward what is needed?

Joe Morris: My hon. Friend knows, as I think we all do, the strength of feeling from SEND parents, staff and teachers, who have been burnt out over 14 years of failure on SEND. I certainly have my frustrations with Northumberland county council's wrong-headed, misguided and deluded approach to the SEND crisis in my county.

[Joe Morris]

That particularly comes across with the lack of provision in the west of Northumberland, when I am constantly confronted by families travelling from Haltwhistle, which is—for those here who are not familiar with the geography of my constituency—in the extreme west of Northumberland, all the way to the coast to Ashington, which is often a journey that exceeds 90 minutes either way. Accessing that provision is incredibly hard and draining.

I want to put on record my thanks to the parents and staff at Hexham Priory school, who provide that supportive and caring environment, to local charities such as Mencap, and to individuals who constantly reach out to my office—I know that there were 11 places, for which 72 applied. This is a crisis that we must work to address.

2.58 pm

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter) on securing this really important debate.

Education is, and always will be, one of my top priorities. I am lucky enough to have visited many of my schools in South West Hertfordshire to see the excellent work that teachers are doing to ensure that every one of the children in my constituency has a good or excellent education. However, the statutory framework around parent choice should be working for schools, not against them. In my constituency, 17% of children have special educational needs, and I regularly receive correspondence and surgery requests from parents and constituents who are going through the process of trying to get an education, health and care plan for their child, or are dealing with the implementation of one.

I am glad that Hertfordshire county council has made progress in this area and is continuing to do so. It is important that progress continues to be made. As someone who is dyslexic, I understand at first hand the frustrations posed by special educational needs and learning disabilities, and how important it is that those with SEND have the support they need to succeed in school.

From conversations with schools in my area and officers at Hertfordshire county council, it is clear that the parent choice framework needs to change. Schools are gaining reputations for being good at educating children with special needs. That is something that all schools should strive for, but it has led to a higher concentration of children with EHCPs in some schools and very low numbers in others, placing a financial burden and additional pressure on the schools that provide such valuable support for children who need it. That should not be the case. All schools should be able to support children with special educational needs; it should not be left to a select few. Every parent wants the best education for their children, and that would allow all schools to continue to provide a top-quality education for all. I urge the Minister to consider changes to the statutory framework.

3 pm

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter) for securing this important debate.

Early in my career, I had the privilege of working for the disability charity Scope, where I successfully campaigned for increased funding for the schools access initiative to improve access to mainstream education. Ever since then, I have been a strong believer that, wherever possible, children with specialist needs should have them met in mainstream schools that support them and everything should be done to facilitate that. While I still believe in mainstream inclusion, I recognise that the demand is great and the complexity of need has increased and changed.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): On the point about access, does the hon. Member agree that it is really important that children are able to get to school in the first place? Private providers of SEND transport have reported that the increase in national insurance contributions will greatly impact their ability to get children to school, because they will have to run at a loss and might have to relinquish some of the contracts. That will put local authorities at risk of not meeting their statutory duties to ensure that children with SEN can access that transport.

Ms Minns: I am sure that the Minister will address that point in her closing remarks, but I want to focus on the need, and the ability to get into a specialist school in the first instance.

James Rennie school in my constituency is rated outstanding and does incredible work for children aged three to 19, but not everyone who needs a school like James Rennie is able to access one. The school has seen a huge increase in demand in recent years from families whose children have specialist needs. At the moment, it is already operating well above its published admission number, something it has achieved only by converting spare space into classrooms, and there is still more demand. For this September, it already has 43 known applications—25% of the children already in the school.

James Rennie is not alone. Department for Education figures from March last year show that there are approximately 4,000 more pupils on the rolls of specialist schools than their reported capacity. Will the Minister address the need that we now have for more specialist schools? Let us be clear: there are 1.5 million SEND children in this country, including the 202 at James Rennie in Carlisle. All of us, in every part of the House, have a duty to ensure that we do not fail them.

3.3 pm

Shokat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter) on securing this vital debate. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests: I am an NHS optometrist. I rise to highlight two critical issues: the severe gap in transport provision for post-16 students, and the additional challenges faced by children with visual impairment in the SEND system.

No parent of a SEND child willingly chooses to send them miles away for education. They do so because there is a lack of local provision. Until the age of 16, local authorities cover the cost of transportation, but beyond that, families are expected to finance it themselves—an expectation that is, frankly, unrealistic. I have spoken to parents who are on the brink of crisis, including

Ruth and Esther from Still SEND 16+. Some are considering giving up their work to personally manage their child's school commute, pushing them into benefits and ultimately costing the state more than simply providing transport would. A consultation has already shown that 29% of affected young people may be forced to abandon education. Will the Government consider making post-16 SEND transport statutory, ensuring that young people do not have to choose between education and affordability?

I also wish to raise the additional challenge faced by children with a visual impairment within the SEND framework. Across the UK, 41,000 children and young people rely on specialist visual impairment education services. Half of them have additional SEND needs, yet local disparities in provision mean that many do not receive the support they require. The Royal National Institute of Blind People has called for urgent reforms. I echo that. The curriculum framework for children and young people with visual impairment must be embedded in all SEND policies. The Government commitment to recruit 6,500 expert teachers must include funding for additional registered qualified habitation specialists and qualified visual impairment specialist teachers, and all teacher training and special educational needs co-ordinator courses must include mandatory visual impairment awareness training to improve inclusivity in mainstream schools.

3.5 pm

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter) on securing today's debate. I draw the attention of the House to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests in respect of support from support staff unions. I also wish to make a non-financial declaration of interest, which is that my partner is a member of the Department's expert advisory panel on SEND. However, the views I express are my own.

In the House we often talk about SEND funding and funding is important, but we also need to talk about SEND spending. The reality is that much money in the system is not spent well and that there are providers who charge too much for too little. In other aspects of education—children's homes and other parts of the sector—we look at overcharging. The pirates of the high needs exist in SEND as well. I see it in my constituency and I see it in the cases parents and families bring to the SEND surgeries I run. I hope that when legislation is brought forward in this area, those problems will be addressed.

In a former role, I submitted a freedom of information request to all local education authorities. Two thirds could not answer a simple question about average spend on EHCPs in their area. Indeed, no such duty exists under the 2014 Act. If we are to drive up standards we need accountability for the money that is being spent, because parents are furious at the money that is not available to their children.

I will make just one more brief point, because time is so short. Much could be done in schools to improve the sensory environment—I believe this point has been partially raised already. When I was a SEND pupil, such simple adjustments as flexible lighting and variable noise levels would have made a huge difference to classroom management and learning support. I hope that when school design standards are next looked at, minimum expectations for inclusion by design can be set.

3.7 pm

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter) for securing this important debate and for powerfully setting out so many of the failures that families in my constituency will be all too familiar with.

There is nothing more heartbreaking than speaking to people in my constituency who have been let down by the national failures of the SEND system: the young person who has been out of school for far too long, with all the impact that has on their mental health and development, just because there is no school suitable for them in our local area; the family who have often had to step back from work to fight for the bare minimum legal entitlement of support that their young person needs to thrive at school; or the far too many of our schools that, despite going above and beyond, know they are not being set up to succeed when it comes to supporting far too many pupils with additional needs.

When she described the system as “lose, lose, lose”, the last Conservative Education Secretary could not have been more right. In my local area, those painful failures are absolutely present at the local authority level too, whether in Hertfordshire county council's shocking failure to deliver EHCP plans, laid bare by Ofsted in recent years, or in Central Bedfordshire council's planning failures when it comes to specialist places, which is causing chaos for some of my local schools. From Ivel Valley school, whose redevelopment is now in doubt, to local schools that found out that their inclusion centre was being paused when developers did not turn up when they were meant to, it is clear that councils need to do much, much better with the tools already in their grasp.

As a former teacher and local authority lead, I know that national change is needed too. The extra money prioritised in the Budget—£1 billion for the high needs block and £750 million for adaptations—is crucial, but much wider work is needed. We need clear accountability frameworks for local authorities and schools that hold them much more accountable for SEND and inclusion. Whatever the school structure, driving up standards should never come at the expense of an inclusive approach to admissions and exclusions.

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): I share my hon. Friend's concern that far too many children in our part of the world miss out on years of education as a result of this crisis. In setting out many of the reforms we need to see, will he join me in urging the Minister to bring forward those reforms as swiftly as possible and to provide a clear timeline so that parents in our constituencies can look forward to them?

Alistair Strathern: Absolutely. It is really welcome that this has been a priority, right at the heart of the Government's early decision making on education, and we need the pace to continue.

It is clear that much further work will be needed on workforce planning. It is fantastic that we finally have a Government who are taking an interest in this issue and commissioning a survey to understand where the workforce shortages are, but it will be crucial for them to put in money to support the resolution of the challenges, especially in edge-of-London constituencies like mine,

[Alistair Strathern]

where all too often the resource is dragged into other authorities as a result of London weighting. We need to make sure that health partners are playing an ambitious role, too. Deprioritising health budgets is a false economy that only leads to increased pressures on education budgets.

3.10 pm

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your leadership, Mr Twigg. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter) for securing this important debate. My area of Norfolk has unique challenges as well as the common challenges we have heard about from many Members. Between 2019 and 2024, we saw a 74.5% increase in the number of EHC plans issued, and it is rising faster than the national average.

I want to touch on a few of the systemic problems I see in my area. Hon. Members have mentioned health. In Norfolk there are more than 10,000 children on waiting lists for an autism or ADHD assessment, and the average waiting time is seven years. That is totally unacceptable. Can the Minister tell us what is being done with the Department of Health and Social Care to expedite that process?

When members of the public contact me, whether because they are being told that, since the specialist provision is within 3 miles, they must walk there and transport will not be funded, or whether it is to tell me about the thousands of pounds being poured into tribunal processes by Norfolk county council, my feeling is overwhelmingly that the system is failing them. We have an adversarial system in which parents and children are not being listened to. We also have a real challenge in Norfolk with the expense of transport, which costs the local authority a huge amount but forces children to travel miles.

There is a school sitting empty in Norwich North that could be turned into a special school. I have been campaigning for that with local councillors for almost four years, but bureaucracy seems to be getting in the way. I do not understand why the simple transfer of a lease is impeding the provision of an extra specialist school for our children. We really need to look at how we can expedite the use of facilities that could be repurposed.

I also hear from constituents that when they are told there is no place for their child in a specialist resource base, they are not told the reasons why. My constituent Joanne was told that there is no right to appeal, so she has been left with no understanding of why her child cannot have the place she desperately needs. I agree that we need clear guidelines for families. We also need a co-production model, so that parents are not just talking to a system, but being included in the system right from the very start, through delivery for our young people.

I welcome the steps that the Government have taken so far. I know that we will take so many more. Ultimately, speed is of the essence.

3.13 pm

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal

(Jenny Riddell-Carpenter) for securing this important debate. This issue resonates deeply with families in Dudley and across the nation.

We all know that too many families are navigating a SEND system that is too difficult. Assessments are taking too long, support is inconsistent, and local authorities are under huge pressure to meet the increasing demand. Schools are struggling with managing children with no diagnosis and supporting those with a diagnosis. In the 2024 autumn Budget, £1 billion of specifically allocated SEND funding was announced. That investment is vital to tackle the challenges that parents and schools face every day.

Dudley is no exception to the issues that have been raised. The number of children with education, health and care plans has risen significantly, reflecting the growing need for specialist support. We must confront the fact that too many families and schools feel that they have to fight the system just to get the right support for their children. My constituent Catherine Beaman has had to set up her own SEND support group in Sedgley, as there is no wraparound service. That simply is not right. While funding is increasing and reforms are under way, families want to feel that our children will get the support they deserve. I ask the Government to move faster and more efficiently to improve the system.

I believe that an early diagnosis is key for our children to get the best start in life, but support is required throughout an individual's lifetime. I ask the Minister to develop a cross-departmental strategy on SEND for the future of our children.

3.14 pm

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter) for securing this important debate. I have been contacted time and again by parents in Gloucester who are desperate for support for their children. They have been failed by the system and their children have been left to suffer as a result. The message from parents is clear: they want more support, a reduction in the waiting times for EHCPs, and a system where every plan is processed quickly, fairly and effectively.

It is clear that the last Government failed to invest, failed to plan and failed an entire generation of our children and their parents. They created a postcode lottery whereby parents are forced to battle the system rather than being supported by it. That is one of the biggest challenges facing parents in my area: a system that denies their child's needs and puts the presumption on saying no, rather than asking how it can best support children.

The repercussions are staggering. In the past decade, decision times on EHCPs increased by 140%, with two in five taking more than six months to process. In Gloucester, only 35% of EHCP decisions were issued within the 20-week target. That is a disgrace, and it is yet again up to the Labour Government to fix the Tory mess.

I understand that there are no quick fixes and there is no magic wand that can undo 14 years of neglect, but I welcome the Government's £1 billion uplift in SEND funding and the £740 million to create new specialist places in mainstream schools, as well as the commitment to train 400 new educational psychologists and retain

these professionals. Will the Minister outline the steps the Government are taking to improve the EHCP process so that families feel supported through it? These measures will ensure that we do not repeat the failures of the last Government. We will be the voice of change, breaking down the barriers to give SEND children better support. These children face so many hurdles in their lives, and it is time we ensured that they have a brighter future and are supported.

3.16 pm

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter) for securing this incredibly important debate. When we came into government we knew we were going to inherit a mess after years of chaos under the Conservatives. Unfortunately, special educational needs provision has been a particularly shocking example of the real consequences for families and individuals who are lost in a system that has been mismanaged, neglected and starved of funding. Put simply, SEND provision was at crisis point.

I pay tribute to the incredible teachers and teaching assistants who work so hard to support every child, in every school, in every classroom. Whenever I visit schools in Derby, I see how dedicated they are to helping children, despite their limited resources. But teachers feel guilty because while they focus their attention on the children with special educational needs, they are unable to support the rest of their classes who, with a little more help, could go on to achieve so much more. Every child deserves the tools they need to succeed, but children cannot succeed when they are deprived of the basic support they need in the classroom.

In my constituency, one of the challenges we face is the availability of appropriate SEND school placements. I welcome the steps that the local council is taking to address that shortage. It is creating 70 more SEND places at the Kingsmead school in Alvaston, as part of a broader plan to create more than 200 additional specialist places for the city's schools over the next two years.

But there is only so much that local authorities are able to do. Funding, support and reform from central Government is crucial, and I am pleased that we have an Education Secretary who is committed to sorting out SEND as one of her top priorities. It is the Conservative party that broke our SEND system, but I say to every parent who is currently struggling to advocate for their child to access the support they need: it is the Labour Government who will work to fix it.

3.19 pm

Jodie Gosling (Nuneaton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter) and congratulate her on securing this debate. I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, and to my partner's interests.

Given the time limit, I will focus on one case in my constituency, out of so many. It is not new, but a decade-long issue on which we have been fighting for one child. We tried to submit this child's assessment when she was three years of age, but it was unsuccessful. Only following an Ofsted intervention at Warwickshire

county council did she finally get a diagnosis of autism, six years later. No directives were made for other special needs.

She is now in secondary school and, eight years on, she is still awaiting diagnosis of and support for ADHD and other complex needs. Her mum constantly has to fight, and has engaged proactively with every intervention she has been offered, such as early help. When her mum last inquired to find out how long they would have to wait, she was told the waiting list is still measured in years, not in months or weeks. After first displaying diagnosable traits at three, there is every chance that this child may leave her education without fully understanding her needs.

The impact on the family has been profound, and the impact on the mental health of this child has been traumatic. Her mother found a notebook detailing her suicide plans when she was in year 6. After sleepless nights worrying, she finally got a mental health assessment weeks later and was told that she did not present a risk as she had not identified the tree or rope she would use to hang herself. This is disgusting and a complete failure. No family should have to go through this.

Jim Shannon: Everybody brings a personal story to this place, and the hon. Lady has brought a very personal story. It is obvious to all of us here that the hon. Lady is a compassionate MP and understands the issues for her constituents, and she has portrayed that very well. She is assiduous and honest, and we thank her for that.

Jodie Gosling: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me a moment to compose myself. Children should not be seen as a tick list of diagnosis criteria. We need a SEND system that deals with children and families holistically, that listens to their voices and that tackles the root causes.

3.22 pm

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter) for securing this debate. I know she is doing all she can to improve SEND provision in her constituency and in the wider county of Suffolk.

SEND issues in my South West Norfolk constituency are a constant in my inbox. After 14 years of neglect, families are at the end of their tether and are desperate for support. The size of the task facing the Government in repairing trust in the SEND system is clear and frankly daunting. As my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal mentioned, we must not forget that in areas like Suffolk and Norfolk the challenges are exacerbated because of rurality and difficulties accessing services that are often miles away.

I have been here before to speak about SEND, and have spoken to the Minister a number of times, but today I want to make a particular point about tribunals. Many county councils are losing scores of tribunal cases. In Norfolk, the Conservative-controlled county council is losing 98% of all tribunal cases—there seem to be no real consequences to the failure to act in the first place—and has racked up a bill of almost £1 million in legal costs in one financial year fighting SEND cases.

[Terry Jermy]

Money that could have been spent on providing services for families is used to pay legal bills. Local authorities usually engage solicitors and barristers, which was never the intention for SEND tribunals. The way they were set up was supposed to mean that neither side needed legal representation.

I urge the Minister to speak to the concerns about tribunals specifically. I recognise that solving the crisis in SEND will not happen overnight, but I am encouraged by the Government's action so far and by the additional money.

3.23 pm

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter) for securing this important debate and for her excellent speech.

As colleagues from all parties have said, the system for young people with special educational needs in England is not working for schools, for councils and, most importantly, for the young people who so desperately need support. This is yet another area where, as the commentator Sam Freedman who worked at the Department of Education put it, the previous Government "chose to go slow in coming up with solutions so as to avoid difficult or expensive decisions before the election."

It has been left to the new Labour Government to fix it. I welcome the steps taken so far, with £1 billion infused into the SEND budget in October and £740 million announced to create thousands of specialist places, including in mainstream schools.

In my Dartford constituency, Kent county council has been unable to respond properly to the families seeking the help that their children need. I hear regularly of EHCP annual reviews taking many times longer than the 12 weeks they should take, including one case in which an annual review is yet to be processed over a year after it took place. I hear of caseworkers leaving the service and families not being told, leaving parents asking for assistance but not being heard. I hear complaints about EHCP decisions going months without an answer. There are frustrating waits to correct errors and multi-year waits for other forms of assessment.

Too many vulnerable young people are missing crucial years of education when they are needed most. There are no quick fixes, but the Government have an opportunity, as we all do, to bring forward much-needed reforms that will improve outcomes over time. So many families are depending on it. Let us work with the Government to ensure it happens.

3.26 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter) on securing this important debate.

Another week, another debate on SEND. Since the start of this Parliament, barely a week has gone by when we have not had questions or debates, either in this Chamber or the main Chamber, on special educational needs and disability provision. From what we have heard today—I particularly thank the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Jodie Gosling) for her courage in sharing her constituent's

moving story—we know that every Member's inbox is bulging with casework from constituents about the dire crisis in SEND, which is why these debates are so oversubscribed. We are also getting report after report. In the last few months, the National Audit Office, the Institute for Fiscal Studies and the Public Accounts Committee have all come out with the same damning verdict about a broken system, with money coming in but outcomes for children going down.

These are some of our most vulnerable children and young people, and we as a society must do our best to meet their needs. We know that families face a postcode lottery, with delays that can last months or even years and vulnerable children missing out on the support that they deserve and need. With special schools full, mainstream schools struggling to provide appropriate support because their budgets are so overstretched, and spiralling high-needs deficits leaving many local authorities on the brink of bankruptcy, it is clear that urgent reform is needed.

As we heard in a Westminster Hall debate just a few weeks ago, the process to get an education, health and care plan is often far too lengthy and far too adversarial. Families are increasingly forced to take their cases to tribunal, with the number of cases doubling since 2014. Local authorities lose almost all those cases, wasting annually over £70 million of public money that could be spent on supporting children and young people rather than fighting unnecessary legal battles. Given the huge rise in demand for support, and the previous Conservative Government's failure to keep up with that demand, local authorities are too often struggling to meet their statutory responsibilities, forcing families to navigate a broken system to secure even the most basic support. As the former Education Secretary Gillian Keegan described it, it is a "lose, lose, lose" system for all.

Ministers have repeatedly, and quite rightly, stressed the need for mainstream schools to be more inclusive in order to meet the rising need for special needs support. I recently visited Stanley school in my Twickenham constituency which, like two other nearby primary schools, has a specialist resource provision. Children with complex needs are able to spend time with dedicated teaching assistants for support, but they have the opportunity to play, socialise and participate, where appropriate, in lessons and other activities with children in the school who are not part of the SRP.

As the hon. Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper) referenced, we are seeing falling rolls in schools and space opening up. SRPs will be a key intervention in our approach to ensuring that mainstream schools can be more inclusive. However, finding and keeping the staff to support children in SRPs or other mainstream settings—or indeed in special school settings—is an ongoing challenge. SRPs need to be properly funded but, as things stand, the headteacher at Stanley explained to me, the maths just does not add up for him. He explained that his wider school budget is having to plug the shortfall in SRP funding. If we are to tempt schools to have SRPs, we are going to have to make sure that they have the resources to provide that SRP.

Support staff costs have risen over the past two years, with unfunded pay increases and increases in employer's national insurance contributions on the horizon. We know that local authorities, health services and schools are all struggling to recruit the number of staff that they need to meet growing demand—both to undertake

assessments in the first place, when a child might be eligible for an EHCP, and then to meet that need in school.

A national survey of headteachers found that only 1% of senior school leaders believed that they had enough funding to meet the needs of pupils with SEND. A report by London Councils on SEND inclusion in schools found that stakeholders from across the sector said that they would be able to be more inclusive if they had more funding. That is why the Liberal Democrats are calling for increased funding for local authorities to reduce the financial burden on schools. We know that the £6,000 per pupil notional SEND budget, which each school is meant to allocate before applying for an EHCP, is, frankly, a fiction in today's school finances, given the pressures on budgets up and down the country.

When I visited Stanley the other week, and when I visited a beautiful new school, Belmont school in Durham, last week, I was told by both headteachers that for many mainstream schools, the disincentive to take on children with SEND is the way that standard assessment tests and other public exam results are reported. Frankly, certain young people in those mainstream settings are not in a position to sit their SATs or GCSEs, yet their results, which will essentially be nil, are reported in the schools' performance measures, which are available publicly. In a competitive schooling environment, where parents vote with their feet for the schools that typically have the highest grades, that sadly results in an incentive for too many schools to actively avoid taking SEND children on to their rolls. There are schools that are doing the right thing and including those children, but, as the Minister is considering how to make mainstream school more inclusive, I wonder what consideration she and other Ministers have given to this issue.

I would like to spend a moment focusing on special schools. For children for whom a mainstream setting is not right, special schools should, and in many cases do, provide the necessary educational support. However, we know that in May 2023, two thirds of special schools were at or over capacity, and the impact of that is children with complex needs being inappropriately accommodated in the mainstream, where their needs cannot be met, which sometimes has a detrimental impact on other pupils and, indeed, staff. Many parents in those situations feel forced to home school. We know that parents who feel that they have had no option but to home school are concerned about what some of the provisions of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill will mean for their being able to ensure that their child is in an appropriate environment.

The lack of specialist provision is being played out in the eye-watering SEND transport costs that local authorities are having to fund to send children out of area. Add to that the cost of private special schools, which are being funded by the taxpayer. I will return to that subject in a moment, but I want to take this moment to welcome the provision in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill that will allow local authorities to open new special schools. For too long, local authorities that have identified a need, and that want to bid for funding and open special schools, have been turned down. A number of applications from local authorities that wanted to open special schools were turned down during the previous Parliament by the previous Government, so I welcome that change in the Bill.

Returning to private special schools, many private SEND schools provide an excellent education and are run as not-for-profit charities. However, the Minister is aware—I have raised this issue previously, not least in Committee on the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill—that private equity firms and other profiteering companies are increasingly entering the special school market, as they see it, at an extortionate cost. Councils are spending £1.3 billion on independent and non-maintained special schools, which is more than double what they spent just a few years earlier. The cost of an independent special school place is, on average, double the cost of a state special school place. Some private equity companies running these schools are making a profit of 20%-plus. Typically, the private equity-owned providers, not the other private sector providers, have the highest level of profitability in the sector. I feel that our most vulnerable children and our local authorities are being held to ransom by some of these companies, which are not behaving in the best interests of our children.

Mr Mohindra: Is the hon. Lady suggesting that we ban private equity companies from being involved in the sector?

Munira Wilson: No. As a Liberal—I have said this many a time—I believe in a mixed economy in many of our public services. I was about to make the point that the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill contains important measures to stop profiteering in children's social care. When I proposed an amendment in Committee to extend the profit cap to special schools, I explained that the private equity companies that are making a ridiculous amount of profit in the children's social care sector are also running private special schools. Some are not making a huge profit, but I do not think a 20%-plus profit margin in a taxpayer-funded system is acceptable, which is why my Liberal Democrat colleagues and I proposed an amendment to the Bill to extend the profit cap to special schools. I was disappointed that Labour Members and Ministers voted against it, but I again urge them to consider the proposal. We know we are in a cash-constrained environment—we hear every day from Ministers, not least the Chancellor, about how little money there is—but savings can be found in this area, and we can invest them back into our most vulnerable children.

My final proposal for Ministers, which the Minister has heard me talk about before, is that for our most complex children, we need a national body for SEND to fund those with exceptionally high needs who face a postcode lottery of provision across the country, and pose a particular risk to local authorities where those needs arise. That body could also have oversight of standards and budgets across the country.

I know that SEND is high on the Minister's agenda. We are still waiting to hear how the £1 billion announced in the Budget will be allocated, but I fear that, given the £2.7 billion of local authority SEND deficits, it will disappear into a black hole. We have been promised reforms later this year, but our children cannot afford to wait. Children missing out on an education will never get that time back. Every child, no matter their needs or background, should be given the opportunity to thrive and fulfil their potential, yet too many children with SEND are simply not getting that right now.

3.38 pm

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter) on securing this important debate. As Members have said, we seem to discuss SEND in this House pretty much on a weekly basis, and rightly so.

I am the vice-chairman of the all-party parliamentary group for special educational needs and disabilities, and I do cross-party work with colleagues in this Chamber and beyond to ensure the experiences of constituents are heard in this place. I, too, have a number of special schools in my constituency—both state and independent.

Hon. Members will have to forgive me for not talking about every single contribution that was made today. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for his comments about sensory and calming rooms, and I hope the Minister will take them into account. Likewise, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra), whose commitment to education in his constituency is obvious. I hope the Minister will consider the statutory changes that he asked for. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Nuneaton (Jodie Gosling), whose moving and heartbreaking story touched us all and will have resonance with all our constituents.

Clearly, special educational needs and disabilities are extraordinarily important. That casework fills my postbag, and a lot of it comes from my predecessors, which demonstrates how long some of these cases can go on for. The Conservative Government's reforms, through the Children and Families Act 2014, marked a significant shift in raising awareness, changing the narrative and addressing educational shortfalls in the system that, under a previous Administration, had failed to adequately make legislative changes for SEND children. The Act created EHCPs, a vital tool for allowing parents to receive the support that they need for their children in the education system.

Only a minority of SEND pupils actually have an EHCP. According to data from the Department for Education for 2023-24, 1.6 million pupils in England had SEND conditions. Of those, 1.2 million received SEND support without an EHCP, meaning that 400,000 had an EHCP. Therefore, my first question to the Minister is: in her plans, what happens to the other 75% of SEND pupils?

Nearly 17% of independent school pupils are receiving SEND support, but only 6% of those have a formal EHCP. I want to quote the Prime Minister, who shared the Government's supposed plan for SEND pupils who do not have an EHCP, or are in the process of acquiring one. In June, the Prime Minister told LBC listeners that:

"Where there isn't a plan, then that exemption doesn't apply."

Will the Minister confirm that the 93,000 children in the independent system who receive SEND support with no formal EHCP are not included in her plans, as the Prime Minister outlined in June?

The 2014 Act was a step change. Now, we need a further step change from this Government. In the Public Accounts Committee's recently published inquiry into the SEND emergency, it was revealed that the Department for Education does not fully understand the root causes

behind the surge in demand for EHCPs. In my area, between 2019 and 2024, EHCPs increased by 63% in Surrey and 93% in Hampshire—well above the national average. In the Committee's inquiry, the Department admitted that it had not adequately examined the barriers to promoting inclusivity in mainstream schools.

That is particularly concerning for the three SEND schools in my constituency—the Ridgeway school, Hollywater school, which is currently expanding due to Hampshire county council's funding, and the Abbey school—which are now under extreme pressure from the exodus of children, once educated in the independent sector, who are now entering the mainstream system. I am also worried by the lack of provision and support given to independent special educational schools, which is affecting three schools in my constituency: More House, Undershaw and Pathways. Those three schools educate nearly 1,000 children with complex SEND needs, and, without these independent schools, my local state schools will crumble under the pressure.

While the Government's £1 billion for SEND is entirely welcome—this funding injection will be a positive boost for local authorities—we have seen that the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Education are not listening to those parents of children who do not have an EHCP and are educated in the independent sector. Therefore, I ask the Minister—

Alistair Strathern: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gregory Stafford: I am under a lot of time pressure, and I want the proposer of the motion to be able to get in, so I will not. I have to leave time for the Minister too, and I really want to hear her answers to my questions.

As I was saying, I would therefore be grateful for the Minister's confirmation that she has engaged with parents and teachers in this situation. And what steps is she taking to ensure that vulnerable children do not suffer the greatest because of this Government's policy?

Despite the—I have to say—utter nonsense we heard from the hon. Member for Gloucester (Alex McIntyre), the Conservative Government launched a review of the SEND system in 2019 to end the postcode lottery, and committed an extra £700 million in the year 2020-21, an 11% increase on the year prior. Moreover, to ensure that children and young people received the most appropriate support for their needs, the national SEND and alternative provision implementation board was established.

Alex McIntyre: Will the hon. Member give way?

Gregory Stafford: I am not going to give way, sorry. That created a national system with new, clear standards under the Green Paper, and a consultation that set out the Conservatives' commitment to delivering the support that children with SEND truly need.

To oversee those vital changes, the SEND system leadership board brought together sector leaders across education, health and social care to drive improvements. The Local Government Association has warned, however, that without proper reform, SEND provision will deteriorate and become financially unviable. A 2024 National Audit Office report echoed those concerns, highlighting the 140% rise in EHCPs since 2015 and warning that the system will become financially unsustainable if unchanged.

Information from the Children and Young People Select Committee last year indicated that there were 2,784 children and young people waiting for autism and ADHD assessments in East Hampshire in my constituency, with waiting times averaging around two years. During that time, children and their families are unable to access the necessary provisions, and that negatively affects their quality of life and puts pressure on local schools. That situation increases the risk of adverse outcomes in educational attainment, mental health and future employment.

I am working closely with local organisations such as SEN Talk CIC, which is a charity founded by a constituent of mine. I have seen its profound impact: 92% of children participating in its programmes report a positive change in their lives, and 80% gain valuable lifelong skills. That is just one of the great initiatives that support many children in my constituency, particularly SEND pupils who are home educated. Although home education is not right for every child, it is a fundamental right that is employed by parents across the UK to give them a hands-on approach to their children's education.

I have spoken to Kate from Nurtured Neuro Kids and others who have expressed their considerable concerns about the impact that the Government's rushed Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill will have on SEND children who are educated from home. They are very upset by the lack of positive acknowledgment from the Education Secretary of the important work that they do to take the strain from the mainstream system, and the lack of consultation or consideration for Conservative amendments that would have protected their work. It is therefore important for constituents such as Kate to be assured that the Government will take steps to ensure that all children with speech and language needs get the help they deserve.

It is clearly a wise and welcome decision for the Government to continue the Nuffield early language intervention programme, which provides crucial support to children with speech and language needs. We must acknowledge, however, that there remains significant disparity in access to funding and support, regardless of the region or the individual specialist needs of the child. Every child who struggles with speech and language must have access to support, regardless of where they live.

Despite a relatively collegiate debate, a number of Members—I pick out the hon. Members for Derby South (Baggy Shanker) and for Gloucester—have seen fit to blame the Conservative record and point out Conservative councils' record in this area. Of the three councils with the highest appeal rates for EHCPs, however, two are Liberal Democrat and one is Labour, so I gently say to Government Members that this is a nationwide problem. Rather than point scoring, it would be better for hon. Members to work together, so that those unfair decisions, and the impact they have on families, are quickly resolved. The comments from the hon. Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson) were particularly uncharitable. I point out to him that in the spring Budget statement, the last Government committed to 15 special schools, with which this Government are not continuing.

I urge the Minister to address the root causes of the problems in the SEND system, including funding and the decision to tax independent schools. Proper reform of the system, including reform of the EHCP process,

would give children a proper educational choice. Without it, we risk what the Public Accounts Committee called a "lost generation of children".

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): I ask the Minister to leave a minute or so at the end, so that the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal can wind up.

3.48 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter) on securing this incredibly important debate, and on the way in which she set out her constituents' case. Like many other hon. Members in the Chamber, she clearly has a keen interest in the support and services that are made available to children and young people with SEND.

I also thank hon. Members from both sides of the House, including the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for recognising that work is needed to put right the terrible situation currently faced by far too many children in the system, and that we need to improve it. Doing so is a vital part of the Government's opportunity mission. We want to break the link between background and opportunity, and that means giving every child, including children with special educational needs and disabilities, the very best start in life.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): On the point about giving children the best start at the earliest stage, what are the Minister's thoughts on properly integrating family hubs into education, health and local authorities, to ensure seamless support for children with SEND?

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend raises an important point. The Government are committed to expanding the work of the family hubs to ensure that every community has support to create that earliest intervention. Many hon. Members have mentioned the importance of early intervention. We agree that it is vital, but I will come to that in more detail. She tempts me down a different path from the one I was going down.

I reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal that addressing challenges in the SEND system is a priority for me, for the Department for Education and for the Government. We recognise that this is a whole-Government effort, including the Department of Health and Social Care, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Department for Transport. Many hon. Members raised challenges around school transport. It is a priority to fix that system and get the best outcomes for every child. I also reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal that I would be delighted to visit her constituency, which I hope can be arranged.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): More than one in three SEND children in Oldham is diagnosed with autism or a neurodivergent condition, which is above the national average. We know that there are implications for educational attainment and work. Has there been an assessment of the increase in children with autism or neurodivergent conditions? If so, what were its conclusions?

Catherine McKinnell: My hon. Friend raises an important point. The additional recognition of special educational needs and disabilities has highlighted not only the extent of the challenge to ensure the best offer for all children, including those with SEND, but that we should give every child the best education, regardless of their special educational needs and disabilities. Our ability to identify aids us to have the infrastructure and support in place to ensure that every child has the best start in life. I will talk in more detail about how we do that, as many hon. Members have asked.

We have reached the point of recognising the challenge, although the surprising contribution of the Conservative Front Bencher, the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford), was a caveat to that. In the context of this debate, where we recognise that there is a shared challenge, his contribution seemed to skip from 2014 to the present day, as though the previous 10 years had not happened. It bore no recognition of that, despite his former Secretary of State for Education, Gillian Keegan, acknowledging that the system presided over in the 10 years prior to 2024 was “lose, lose, lose”. I agree that we should not be arguing about who created the challenges; we should be getting down and resolving the challenges together. I did not think that the hon. Gentleman’s contribution was respectful of the positive contributions that other Members from both sides of the House had made.

Alex McIntyre: I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for having the confidence and courage to accept interventions, unlike some hon. Members. Does she agree that the shadow Minister’s comments showed how out of touch the Conservative party is? Parents have been in tears in my surgeries due to the system that the Conservatives left behind.

Catherine McKinnell: I appreciate what my hon. Friend says. I am happy to take interventions, but I have to cover a lot of issues that hon. Members have raised. I hope that, in the time we have left, I have the opportunity to do so.

I know we all agree that every child deserves the opportunity to achieve, thrive and succeed. Where possible, as highlighted by a number of hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns), that should be within a mainstream setting with their friends. However, we are aware that there are significant challenges currently in achieving that. That is why we are prioritising early intervention, which a number of hon. Members have raised, and inclusive provision within mainstream settings.

We know that providing early intervention prevents unmet needs from escalating and supports children to achieve their goals and thrive alongside their peers. We are really committed to working to deliver that for every child in every community. We are doing so by increasing high needs funding by £1 billion, which brings the total funding to £11.9 billion. Suffolk county council is allocated £124 million through the high needs funding block. That is an increase of £10.3 million and a 9% increase per head for two to 18-year-olds.

We know that the high needs funding formula needs to be looked at. It has been largely unchanged because we needed to prioritise making sure that we create a fair funding system, and direct funding to where it is needed

and can make the biggest impact. That is why we are allocating funding towards capital to ensure that we have places available where they are needed. The £740 million of high needs capital can be used by local authorities—we will announce the allocations in due course—to deliver new places within mainstream settings, special schools and other specialist settings, and to improve the suitability and accessibility of current buildings. It will also help to tackle the issue of transport, which many hon. Members have raised. If we have mainstream availability of specialist support within a local community, there will be no need to travel such distances.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): Will the hon. Member give way?

Catherine McKinnell: I am sorry; I will not be able to respond to hon. Members’ queries and concerns if I give way again.

EHCP timeliness was raised by a number of hon. Members, including by my hon. Friends the Members for Hitchin (Alistair Strathern) and for Dartford (Jim Dickson), whose contribution was excellent, and the hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra). We monitor the timeliness of ECHPs, but there is a balance to be struck between issuing them within the timeframes required, which we need to see, and making sure that they achieve the outcome that we want—namely, better opportunities for the children that they are intended to serve. We will continue to monitor that and work with local authorities to improve it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal will be aware of the key role that alternative provision settings such as pupil referral units play in supporting vulnerable children and young people with SEND. We want them to work together with mainstream settings to make sure that we have targeted interventions and support to improve behaviour and attendance and to reduce the risk of exclusions, which my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin raised.

Speech and language is an important opportunity to intervene at the earliest possible stage for children. We know that children need to find their voice and that an increasing number of children are starting school without having had the support to do that previously. That is why we have prioritised the early language and support for every child programme. We are trialling new and better ways to ensure that we can reach communication needs in early years and primary schools.

I am very conscious of time. I want to let the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) know that I take on board the concerns that he raised. The abuse that he described is abhorrent and disturbing, and not within the current regulations or rules. We are running a consultation on the use of reasonable force, which is open until 29 April 2025 and contributions are welcome.

I am afraid that I have to draw to a close. I thank all hon. Members who have contributed; they made the case for their constituents well. I recognise the work of all those in our education, health and care systems who work with our children and young people with SEND in Suffolk and across the country. We need to deliver the very best for our children and young people, and to give them the best start in life. I am sure that, together, with this determined effort, we can do that.

3.59 pm

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: I thank the Minister for her comments. It is great to hear that this issue continues to be a national priority. Members on both sides of the House will continue to work with the Government to ensure that each of our regions can deliver and help to fulfil that goal. I thank all hon. Members for contributing and look forward to welcoming them to Suffolk Coastal to see it at first hand.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered SEND education support.

Affordable Rural Housing

4.1 pm

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): I call Olivia Bailey to move the motion. I will then call the Minister to respond. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention in a 30-minute debate. I call Olivia Bailey.

Olivia Bailey (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the provision of affordable rural housing.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I am delighted to have secured this important debate, and I look forward to hearing from my colleagues and my hon. Friend the Minister over the next 30 minutes.

My Reading West and Mid Berkshire constituency boasts the very best of the English countryside. We have many beautiful rural villages and hamlets, many nestled in the north Wessex downs national landscape, formerly known as an area of outstanding natural beauty. They are villages full of families who have lived there for generations, but unfortunately villages now under threat due to a lack of affordable housing. There are many barriers to affordable housing in those villages: some are a consequence of the national landscape designation, but others are a consequence of a lack of political will. In west Berkshire people have been let down by Conservative and then Liberal Democrat administrations that offer warm words about the future of our villages, but are unwilling to take the action necessary and do the hard work to secure not massive developments in our villages, but small developments, with the support of the community, of houses at an affordable price.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady. This is a massive subject for my constituents, as it is for hers. For those who have lived in the countryside, who were born in the countryside and whose grannies, granddads and great grannies all live in the countryside, when it comes to affordable houses they have a real problem. Does she agree that perhaps we need legislation to ensure that those who are born in the countryside can stay in the countryside, in housing that is affordable for them?

Olivia Bailey: I thank the hon. Member; I agree that this is about keeping generations of families together and I will talk more about that later in my speech.

As I said, people have been let down by Conservative and then Liberal Democrat administrations, which have been bodging the local plan process, trying to pass the buck and avoid the hard work needed to secure the vibrant villages that we were promised.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): In response to what the hon. Lady has just said, I would like to congratulate the Liberal Democrat-led South Hams district council, which has just contributed £623,000 to support a community housing project that will offer 39 new energy-efficient, 100% social rented homes for people with a local connection, including a community garden and orchard and a community building that will be delivered once the homes are complete. Does she agree that that is the kind of development that we need to see?

Olivia Bailey: I am delighted that the hon. Member has had an opportunity to congratulate her council, and I thank her for her intervention.

With a lack of supply come skyrocketing house prices. In the five years to 2022, house prices in the countryside increased at close to twice the rate of those in urban areas. We need only look at the nine houses currently for sale in Upper Basildon in my constituency: four are on the market for more than £1.25 million and only one at under half a million pounds. Across the villages in my constituency, there are very few properties available for private rent, and the small number that are available are simply unaffordable for many.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Twigg. In North Warwickshire, private rents grew to an average of £898 in January this year—an increase of 11% from the previous year. Young people are prevented from starting their careers in North Warwickshire because those rent increases are unaffordable, and many of my young constituents are having to move away because of the lack of affordable housing. Does my hon. Friend agree that increased rental costs and a lack of social housing in rural areas prevent local economic growth and pose insurmountable challenges for young families in our rural areas?

Olivia Bailey: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend. Simply put, these costs price people out of the community. One constituent in Bradfield shared her story with me. Her daughter would love to be able to stay in the village that she grew up in, but there are no affordable houses that are the right size for her young family. Eventually, she is likely to have to move away—a story repeated across my constituency.

Without affordable housing, schools close because there are not enough children to fill a class; pubs shut their doors because there are not enough punters to buy pints; and services for the elderly stop operating because there is nobody to volunteer. We simply cannot have a community without people, and those people need affordable homes.

I am delighted that the Government are committed to building the housing we need and to boosting home ownership, providing over £5 billion total housing investment in 2025-26 and a £500 million top-up to the affordable homes programme, and building an ambitious 1.5 million homes with the infrastructure that they need. I am also pleased that the Government are paying particular attention to housing in rural communities, giving local authorities flexible but ambitious targets for affordable housing development, recognising the value of rural exception sites and community-led development, and committing to look at how national policy can promote affordable rural housing.

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship today, Mr Twigg. In my constituency we have some villages, such as Dent, where 40% of the homes are second homes or Airbnb-type short-term lets. I also have concerns for Morecambe, with the Eden Project coming there. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should look at the licensing and regulation of short-term lets as part of the solution to the rural housing crisis?

Olivia Bailey: I am pleased that the Government are acting to level the playing field for first-time buyers, and I am sure that the Minister will elaborate further on that in his statement today.

David Smith (North Northumberland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mr Twigg. Similarly, in my constituency, the county council has built just 15,000 homes since 2013 and only 3,700 affordable homes, yet 2,000 people are in urgent need of housing. I am also delighted by this Government's commitment to building 1.5 million homes, and I am sure my hon. Friend agrees that it would be fantastic to see an allocation within that for rural areas in the country.

Olivia Bailey: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend that we need more affordable housing in our rural areas; that is what I am seeking to address with this debate.

I will focus first on rural exception sites, which allow the delivery of small developments of affordable housing on the edges of rural communities, solely for local people. The role of rural housing enablers to deliver those are crucial, and I consider Connecting Communities in Berkshire to be the gold standard there. The team works in partnership with developers, landowners, local authorities, parish councils and local people to try to build truly affordable housing in rural exception sites. It is currently working to deliver affordable housing in Beenham, identifying housing need and suitable land in partnership with the parish council and the local community.

The Government are committed to funding the rural housing enabler programme until the end of March, and I know my constituents would welcome an update on its future from the Minister today. More widely, I also ask the Minister to provide an update on how he plans to promote exception sites as he prepares to consult on national development management policies in the coming months.

We also need to consider the impact of affordable and social housing stock being sold off by developers and moving out of the hands of the local community. I welcome the Government's focus on the needs of social renters in the revised national planning policy framework and the commitment to explore how national policy can support social housing.

Sadly, constituents have shared with me that Sovereign, which owns a significant proportion of social housing in West Berkshire, has been selling off older properties in West Berkshire's villages, which means that swathes of perfectly usable social housing stock is going into the private sector to be sold or rented at unaffordable prices. Housing that could be offered for social rent to local people who cannot afford to buy in their village is now being bought up and taken out of the community. I share the frustration of parish councils, who are working to increase the amount of affordable housing available through developing rural exception sites, when they see a social landlord putting existing affordable properties in the village up for sale. Will the Minister consider this particular problem as he consults on national policy to support the delivery of social housing?

Rural communities in Reading West and Mid Berkshire are at a turning point. They desperately need affordable housing in their local areas and they finally have a Labour Government laser-focused on delivering the

housing that this country needs, focusing on policy reforms that enable local authorities to build the affordable homes that will keep communities together and supporting the work of organisations such as Connecting Communities in Berkshire and local parish councils such as Beenham. These communities need a local council to match that ambition.

I look forward to working with the Lib Dems in West Berkshire council to deliver vibrant villages, ending the era of bodged planning processes, internal politics and inaction, the era of being aware of the issue and acknowledging that something must be done, but being unwilling to take the action to tackle it. I am incredibly optimistic that we can achieve that, having seen the brilliant work that people in my constituency are doing to secure the future of their villages. I am confident that this Labour Government can and will deliver for them. From Beech Hill to Mortimer, from Beenham to Compton, from Hampstead Norreys to East and West Ilsley, and from Upper Bucklebury to Upper Basildon, we can build the affordable housing that is so vital for these beautiful villages to continue thriving far into the future.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op) *rose—*

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): May I just check that the Member has sought permission to speak?

Olivia Bailey *indicated assent.*

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook) *indicated assent.*

4.11 pm

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West and Mid Berkshire (Olivia Bailey) on securing this debate on the important topic of the affordability of housing in our rural communities. I represent a seaside community; around 30% of my constituency is coastal villages, where we acutely feel the pressures of the rural housing crisis. As other Members have spoken about, our community has seen the rise of Airbnbs and second homes, putting on real pressure and pushing up rental prices and house prices in our community. We have not seen enough affordable homes built in our communities. The situation now facing our villages and rural areas is that many young people find that they cannot afford to live in the villages they grew up in and are forced to move away from family.

John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): My constituency faces a chronic lack of housing as well, which disproportionately impacts young people; they face a future where they cannot afford to live in the place where they grew up. Some 8.4% of all residential properties in the dales are not the primary homes of residents. Does my hon. Friend recognise the significant impact that second homes and holiday lets have on housing supply and prices in rural areas?

Helena Dollimore: That is a pressure that many of our rural communities face. There is definitely a contribution that holiday lets can make to the local tourism economy, but many of us agree that we need to get the right balance between supporting tourism and providing homes for local families.

It is so often the case that many local people in the rural areas of my constituency cannot afford to rent or buy in the areas they grew up in and are forced to move further away. We also see that, when developments do happen in those villages, too often new-build developments are given the green light with zero affordable homes on those sites. Just last year, in Peasmarsh in my constituency, 41 homes were given the green light on a greenfield site, with zero affordable homes. We see developers using loopholes around viability to wriggle out of their responsibility to deliver affordable housing, and too often councillors feel that their hands are tied by the current legislation. I urge the Government, as part of the reforms to the planning system, to ensure we stop developers getting away with wriggling out of their responsibility to deliver affordable homes.

It is also clear that, with the right focus and the right local leadership, we can get this right. I draw attention to a brilliant local community-led housing scheme in Icklesham, a small village in my constituency just outside Hastings. The village came together to form the Icklesham Parish Community Land Trust and built 15 housing units for local people, all for social rent. If a village the size of Icklesham can do it—let me tell hon. Members, it is a very small area; I would be delighted to welcome the Minister there—anywhere can deliver affordable social housing, whether rural or urban. That is what we need to build on.

As we move forward with the vital mission of building 1.5 million homes under this Labour Government, we must ensure that our rural communities see the benefit and that developers cannot wriggle out of their commitments to deliver affordable housing.

4.15 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): It is a pleasure to serve under you in the Chair, Mr Twigg.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West and Mid Berkshire (Olivia Bailey) on securing this important debate. She has only been in the House a relatively short time, but she has already established a reputation as a doughty champion of her constituency. Those she has the privilege of representing should be reassured by the fact that she has already assiduously conveyed their views and concerns to Ministers on a range of matters, including the one we are considering today. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore) and others who have made contributions to the debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reading West and Mid Berkshire raised a number of distinct issues on the provision of affordable rural housing and I will seek to respond to as many of them as I can in the time available to me. Before I do, I would like to make some brief remarks about planning reform and the role of the planning system in delivering homes of all kinds and meeting identified need for affordable housing, as a means of providing some important context.

It is not in dispute in this Chamber, I do not think, that the Government have inherited an acute and entrenched housing crisis, or that significantly boosting the supply of homes of all tenures is essential to tackling it. That is why we acted decisively to overhaul the national planning policy framework last year, to revise the anti-supply changes made by the previous Government in December 2023,

[Matthew Pennycook]

and to introduce a range of pro-growth measures that will enable us to build the homes and infrastructure our country needs.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Reading West and Mid Berkshire (Olivia Bailey) on securing this important debate. I think it is true that all of us would like to see more affordable housing delivered for our constituents, but does the Minister agree that top-down housing targets for all areas of the United Kingdom are not always suitable? I am thinking of my own constituency on the Isle of Wight, where on average we deliver 300 homes a year and are committed, through our local plan, to deliver 450. The Government are asking us to deliver 1,000. Does the Minister agree that there have to be some areas of the United Kingdom where the standard method does not apply?

Matthew Pennycook: I disagree with the hon. Gentleman. We think the changes we have introduced and the revised standard method are appropriate. Every part of the country will need to play its part in achieving our ambitious plan for change milestone of building 1.5 million new homes across the country. That is the scale of ambition we need commensurate with the crisis we face, and that crisis affects every part of England.

The Government believe in a plan-led system. It is through local development plans that communities shape decisions about how to deliver the housing and wider development their areas need. Local plans must remain the cornerstone of our planning system and we are determined to progress towards universal coverage. My hon. Friend the Member for Reading West and Mid Berkshire will appreciate that I am unable to comment on her local plan or how her local planning authority may interpret national planning policy due to the quasi-judicial nature of the planning process, but there is merit in me making some general comments on plan making in local authority areas that overlap with national landscapes, as is the case in her own area.

As my hon. Friend is aware, the Government are committed to maintaining strong protections for our protected landscapes. We are clear that the scale and extent of development within such designated areas should be limited so that we are able to pass on their attractions and important biodiversity to future generations. National planning policy is clear that significant development within a national landscape should be refused, other than in exceptional circumstances where it can be demonstrated that the development is in the public interest, taking into account a range of considerations. That includes fully exploring the role of planning conditions and developer contributions to mitigate the impacts of development or support infrastructure provision as appropriate.

When it comes to plan making, local authorities are expected to use the revised standard method to assess housing needs. However, they are able to justify a lower housing requirement than the figure set by the method on the basis of local constraints on land availability, development and other relevant matters such as national landscapes, but also protected habitats and flood risk areas. Local authorities will need to consider these matters as they prepare their plans, but we expect them

to explore all options to deliver the homes their communities need. That means maximising brownfield land, densifying available brownfield sites, working with neighbouring authorities on cross-boundary housing growth and, where necessary, reviewing the green belt. They are then expected to evidence and justify that approach to planning for housing in their local planning consultation. An examination of their approach will be scrutinised by a planning inspector to determine whether the constraints are justified and the plan is sound.

I turn to the focus of my hon. Friend's remarks—namely, the case for supporting rural communities to build new homes for local people, and in particular for boosting the supply of rural affordable housing. The Government are committed to doing so, and it was a pleasure to have the chance to discuss this matter with my hon. Friend last month. It cannot be right that, as a number of hon. Members said, young people in particular are often unable to remain in the villages in which they grew up. That harms not only them and their families but the vibrancy and long-term viability of rural communities.

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that the most important policies that we can look at in planning reform to deliver genuinely affordable homes in rural communities are a bold approach to land reform, the abolition of hope value and the reform of compulsory purchase orders to allow our local planning authorities to assemble the land that we need in our rural communities?

Matthew Pennycook: As my hon. Friend is no doubt aware, we have already brought into force a discretionary power to disapply hope value in certain instances where a public interest test could be met. We are committed, through the forthcoming planning and infrastructure Bill, to bring forward further reform of the compulsory purchase process and compensation, so he can look forward to seeing more action in that area.

National policy makes it clear that local authorities should ensure that their planning policies and decisions respond to local circumstances and support housing that reflects local needs. That includes promoting sustainable development in local areas and ensuring that housing is located where it will maintain and enhance the vitality of rural communities. Planning policies should identify opportunities for villages to grow and flourish, especially where that will support local services. We also want more affordable housing in rural areas, as part of our manifesto commitment to deliver the biggest increase in social and affordable house building in a generation. We have already taken steps to support the delivery of affordable rural housing. For example, our golden rules for green-belt development—which ensure an affordable housing contribution 15 percentage points above the highest existing affordable housing requirement that would otherwise apply to the development, subject to a cap of 50%—will unlock new affordable housing provision in a range of rural locations.

Mr Angus MacDonald (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): Will the Minister say a few words about the massive change in our lifetimes? Doctors, policemen and teachers had houses owned by their local authority body, and they have now been sold. That pressure is continuing. Does he think we should go back to that to ensure that people can work in those sectors?

Matthew Pennycook: I think the hon. Gentleman is making a wider point. I am not sure what specific legislative provision he is referring to in the past. There is a very clear place for ensuring we are building the right types of homes in all parts of the country, including homes that support key workers and other frontline public sector staff, and I am more than happy to discuss that matter with him outside the Chamber.

The Government have been clear that we want to look further at measures to support affordable housing in rural areas. That is why we asked a question on that issue as part of the consultation on reforms to the national planning policy framework last year. The responses we received are informing our ongoing work in relation to producing a set of national policies for decision making—national development management policies, as they were referred to under the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023. Although I cannot give my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West and Mid Berkshire a firm date today, I can assure her and other hon. Members that we will consult on those policies in the spring, as promised, and I will update the House in due course.

My hon. Friend also knows that, since taking office, the Government have provided additional grant funding to support the delivery of affordable homes in all parts of England. At the Budget on 30 October 2024, the Chancellor set out details of an immediate one-year cash injection of £500 million to top up the existing affordable homes programme, which will deliver up to 5,000 new social and affordable homes. On 12 February 2025, the Government announced a further cash injection of £300 million to the existing affordable homes programme, which will deliver a further 2,800 new homes, more than half of which will be for social rent.

At the multi-year spending review this year, the Government will set out details of new investment to succeed the 2021 to 2026 affordable homes programme. That new investment will deliver a mix of homes for sub-market rent and home ownership, with a particular focus on delivering homes for social rent. We know that delivering affordable housing in rural places can be especially challenging. There are particular challenges that come with the delivery of sites in rural areas, so that is one of the factors that will be taken into consideration in the design of the future capital investment programme, which will succeed the existing one.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reading West and Mid Berkshire might also like to know that, to provide additional support for rural housing delivery in settlements with populations of fewer than 3,000 people, Homes England has developed a rural housing strategy and has dedicated rural housing champions in each of its operating areas.

My hon. Friend rightly drew attention to the significant contribution that can be made by rural exception sites. As she is aware, these allow local authorities to address the housing needs of rural communities by creating sites where local residents, and others with a strong family or employment connection, can live in affordable homes and in perpetuity. Rural exception sites tend to be just outside village boundaries, where housing is not normally granted permission, so it is possible to create them even in the green belt or designated rural areas. We recognise the strong support for rural exception sites and the potential for strengthening this policy.

That is why we made clear in our response to the consultation on the revised national planning policy framework that we are giving further consideration to how we can better support rural affordable housing, including through use of exception sites. That will include consideration of how we can drive greater uptake of rural exception sites and introduce a more streamlined approach. Again, I will set out details about our thinking in due course.

I will take forward this work with my colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, including by considering the role that rural housing enablers play in supporting rural affordable housing. My hon. Friend mentioned a case in her own constituency. Again, I am afraid that I cannot give her any firm assurances in this debate in respect of ongoing funding because that is subject to the Government's ongoing business planning, but I can assure her that we will provide an update at the earliest possible opportunity.

I want to briefly reference a couple of issues that hon. Members raised, as I have the time. The first is the problem highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West and Mid Berkshire of developers and housing associations—in her case, Sovereign—selling off much-needed social and affordable homes in rural areas. She might like to know that when and if grant-funded homes are sold or part-sold, there is a system in place to recover Government grants through the recycled capital grant fund. That means that the cash value of the grant is placed in a fund to be used for further investment in new affordable housing supply. I am more than happy to discuss with her the specific issues with Sovereign in her own constituency.

Briefly, on short-term lets and the existing developer contribution system, Members across the House will know that we have debated this issue at length on various occasions. We are committed to taking forward the previous Government's measures—a registration scheme for short-term lets and the abolition of the furnished holiday lettings scheme, which comes into force on 1 April—but we have been clear that that is not enough and we are giving very considered thought to what further powers local authorities need, in particular, though there is a balance to be struck, to deal with excessive concentrations of short-term lets that often deny local people not only homes to buy but, increasingly, homes to rent.

On section 106 contributions, we are reviewing viability and we are committed to strengthening the existing section 106 system, in lieu of taking forward the previous Government's approach, which was an infrastructure levy. When taking those reforms forward, we need to ensure that local authorities are better able to negotiate at the point that those agreements are reached and are then able to ensure that developers honour the commitments that they make in those agreements, when struck.

In conclusion, I again congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West and Mid Berkshire for securing this important debate, giving the House an opportunity to consider a range of important issues relating to affordable rural housing supply.

Ben Maguire: Will the Minister give way?

Matthew Pennycook: I will not—I am just winding up, I am afraid.

[Matthew Pennycook]

I hope that I have not only conveyed the Government's firm support for delivering much-needed affordable housing in rural areas, but reassured my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West and Mid Berkshire and others that I am actively considering what further measures are necessary to ensure that we do so while balancing the need to ensure that development is sustainable and appropriate. I hope I can continue to draw on the insights provided by my hon. Friend and other colleagues, as the Government continue to develop their thinking in this area.

Question put and agreed to.

Groceries Code Adjudicator

4.30 pm

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Groceries Code Adjudicator.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg.

There is a deep unfairness at the heart of our food system. That unfairness stems from the power imbalance between producers and retailers. At one end, the retailers we buy our food from are making huge profits. Last year, the big four supermarkets saw a 97% increase in their profits: Tesco made £2.3 billion, Asda made £1.1 billion and Sainsbury's made £701 million. That is enough to convince anyone that there is enough money in the till to go around.

As we know, food prices have soared since 2022, yet Welsh farming incomes are actually falling. That is a sign of a food system that generates huge profits for the supermarkets and the big retailers, while the producers at the other end suffer what they must. Farmers and growers carry the risks of food production but do not receive a fair share of the rewards. The people who grow our food deserve to earn a decent living. That is why the Liberal Democrats will keep campaigning to level the metaphorical playing field for farmers.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): The Groceries Code Adjudicator was established by my party, the Liberal Democrats, during that sad time in Government. It was an extremely important achievement designed to protect the interests of farmers and food producers. Some hon. Members will know of my background as a director of the National Farmers Union, and my constituency of Tiverton and Minehead is home to some 1,600 farmers. In recognising that farmers are the lifeblood of the rural economy, would my hon. Friend agree that the GCA's resources and scope must be expended to ensure it can exercise its investigative powers and correct the imbalance between our farmers and the big supermarket chains?

David Chadwick: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the achievements of the Liberal Democrats in power, particularly the fact that we have a long record of standing up for rural communities. The physical hills that Welsh farmers have to climb are getting steeper. Energy and fertiliser costs are rising, subsidy schemes are changing and farm incomes are falling. To make matters worse, the Government's family farm tax threatens to further strain their livelihoods. Those are just a few of the battles that farmers face. Their industry deserves a fair market, and it is for that reason that the Liberal Democrats introduced the Groceries Code Adjudicator during the coalition years.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate forward. He is absolutely right to refer to the importance of the Groceries Code Adjudicator. In my constituency of Strangford, we are blessed to have many local suppliers and farmers, which have created jobs and opportunity. They supply to large shops and supermarkets, and are very much an integral part of the community. Does the hon. Gentleman

agree that more needs to be done to ensure fair treatment, and to ensure that local suppliers can take advantage of fair payment and commission terms? We need fair play—and we need fair prices for the products we produce.

David Chadwick: Absolutely. We need greater transparency down the entire supply chain and fair conditions for everyone involved in the food system. The GCA was established in response to multiple scandals where large supermarkets used their market power to take advantage of local producers. It has helped to improve fairness in the food supply chain. Since its introduction in 2014, the Groceries Code Adjudicator has made significant progress, and the number of issues around the treatment of farmers by supermarkets and retailers has fallen. It is my belief, and that of many farmers and producers that I represent, that the Groceries Code Adjudicator needs to be strengthened and better resourced, and its remit expanded if we are to ensure fairness in our supply chain.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way because he has come to a very important part of the debate. First, we need proper resourcing of the GCA as it currently exists. Secondly, there is a structural problem with the accountability chain here. The GCA effectively governs the relationship between the middle link, the processors and distributors and the supermarkets. The Agriculture Act 2020 deals with primary producers in that middle link. What we need now, surely, as well as extra resources, is a process by which the whole thing can be rewired together.

David Chadwick: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. I agree wholeheartedly. He will be aware that the levy that supermarkets pay to fund the Groceries Code Adjudicator has not been increased since 2018, despite the massive increases in food prices and supermarket profits since then.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): In November 2024, research by Riverford Organic Farmers, based in my constituency of South Devon, showed that 61% of farmers are concerned that they will not be operating within the next year but only 25% of them believe the claims that the big six grocers support British farmers. Would my hon. Friend agree that the big six need to do more to support our farming sector?

David Chadwick: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. She is absolutely right to highlight the power imbalance between the producers and the retailers. It is quite right that she also focuses on the important research that has been done on this topic by organisations like Riverford. The evidence they have provided has been crucial in helping us push forward the campaign for fairer prices for producers.

It is my belief, and that of many farmers and producers I represent, that the Groceries Code Adjudicator needs to be strengthened, better resourced, and its remit expanded if we are to ensure fairness in our supply chain.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): As the hon. Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick) mentioned, Welsh Government figures show that income

fell for Welsh farmers by 34% between April 2023 and March 2024 and the dairy income by 59%. Does he believe we should safeguard all future food production in Wales? Welsh farmers should be able to rely on a fair deal for the products and, as Elfyn Llwyd called for 10 years ago, the regulatory bodies should be made to support that.

David Chadwick: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention. She is absolutely right to draw attention to the plight of Welsh farmers. Their livelihoods are under threat. That is why it is so important that we ensure greater fairness in the supply chain for them, to ensure that they get a fair price for what they produce, and that the Government are fully aware of the impact the tax changes they wish to make will have on the rural communities we represent.

Rural communities are really suffering at the moment. We know that constituencies like my own are losing thousands of young people every year because there are fewer and fewer jobs to go around. The long-term consequences of that are terminal. That is why it is so important that we ensure that farming, the engine of the rural economy, continues to generate profit and jobs throughout the rural economy.

The GCA has improved the rights of farmers, but producers still report bullying behaviour by major suppliers. Just a few examples of the ongoing mistreatment of producers: a delay in payments—sometimes farmers and producers are not paid for up to and sometimes exceeding 45 days; no compensation for forecasting errors; de-listing; changes to orders placed and orders eventually accepted. It is a story of David versus Goliath.

With six major buyers and 14 retailers covered by the GCA, the supermarkets have often been accused of using their collective buying power to force thousands of farmers and producers to plough on with prices that have fallen below the cost of production. Supermarkets helped themselves to a 97% surge in profits in the last year alone. They passed on higher prices to customers during the inflationary crisis, yet they are not handing on a fair share of that to producers.

I am raising this issue after a local farmer told me how a supermarket went back on its pledge to buy animals he had spent years rearing, leaving him at a loss. That is not a small loss for a local farmer. The costs involved in raising livestock to maturity are immense, and the losses when supermarkets change their mind are damaging to local producers. A recent survey on behalf of Riverford found that 45% of farmers feared going out of business, with 75% of those asked saying that treatment by supermarket buyers was one of their top concerns. Research from Sustain has found that only 5% of farmers want to sell to supermarkets due to having little say over prices and not enough connection to shoppers.

The consequences of unfair practices extend far beyond individual farms. The UK's food security is at risk when farmers are unable to make a living from their work. As more farmers are forced out of business, we become increasingly reliant on imported food, which can be subject to price fluctuations and supply chain disruptions. This brings me to the role of the Groceries Code Adjudicator. While the GCA and the groceries supply code of practice—I will refer to this as the code—are highly regarded among farmers and the rest of the industry, I often hear from local producers in my constituency

[David Chadwick]

that they feel that the GCA does not have all the powers it needs to fully level the playing field between farmers, producers and retailers.

Beyond powers, there remains work to be done on increasing awareness of the GCA among farmers. Although awareness of the GCA and its roles has increased since 2014, it has stalled recently, and a significant number of producers still do not fully understand its role. More worryingly, many farmers still feel reprisals for reporting breaches of the code. A staggering 67% of farmers have reported fearing being de-listed should they speak out about unfair practice by supermarkets. That means that there is almost certainly an under-reporting of incidents to the GCA, which undermines its effectiveness.

More needs to be done to improve confidence in the system for producers and to enable the GCA to instil understanding and trust in its role. That also extends to the requirement for the GCA to have received a complaint to launch a report. People I speak to in the industry would like the GCA to have the ability to launch its own investigations without having to wait for a farmer to report malpractice first. An example of using that power in practice could be launching an investigation into the recent issues with Amazon or concerns over the chicken meat supply chain.

The parameters of the GCA and the code are insufficient in an ever-changing food market. The inclusion of Amazon into the 14 suppliers covered by the GCA was a welcome move, but given Amazon's low level of compliance with the code, it raises serious questions about whether other significant retailers who make less than £1 billion in revenue from the food system are falling through the gap. Likewise, there are serious concerns that food processors, packagers and manufacturers who act as the middle people between farmers and retailers are also falling through the gaps when it comes to regulation, despite collectively supplying over half of Britain's food.

The GCA's seven golden rules have been widely welcomed by the sector. To protect suppliers, the rules should be fully incorporated into the code, rather than only being guidelines. This needs to happen quickly, because suppliers are continuing to experience difficulties in cost price increase negotiations as a result of the ongoing inflation crisis we find ourselves in the middle of. The supermarkets are willing to use energy and fertiliser price inflation as justification for increasing prices for customers, but are seemingly unwilling to pay farmers a fair price that recognises those changes and the increased input costs for farmers.

The Government must strengthen the Groceries Code Adjudicator and the groceries code to ensure that we have true fairness across supply chains. First, the Government can improve the visibility of the GCA and awareness of its work. The GCA must give farmers the confidence to report issues and to know that they will be handled confidentially, especially as many farmers feel that they may be punished or blacklisted for making complaints. Secondly, the GCA only has seven members of staff, including the adjudicator himself, yet is responsible for regulating an industry worth billions of pounds.

The GCA's reliance on temporary and seconded staff hinders its ability to enforce the code. Giving the GCA a dedicated staff team would allow it to respond effectively

at all times and to build and retain specialist knowledge. Likewise, the GCA should not have to wait for a producer to report malpractice. If it suspects that retailers are not complying with the code, let it launch its own independent investigations.

We should also move to expand the remit, as over half of the food being supplied by packagers, processors, distributors and manufacturers and in several other key areas of the food supply chain still falls outside of the regulation. The seven golden rules have been rightly welcomed across the industry, but many concerns remain that those are only guidelines set by the GCA, rather than forming part of the code itself. Legally incorporating them into the code would help to ensure that producers are fully covered when it comes to reports of unfair cost-price negotiations.

Overall, the Groceries Code Adjudicator is improving the relationship between farmers and large retailers, but as our food market evolves, so too must the GCA. By expanding its remit, providing additional resources and enhancing its enforcement powers, the Government can ensure that the GCA truly works for farmers and producers, and ensures fairness in the food supply chain. Let's give our food system the fair market it needs, let's give our rural communities the support they need, and let's make sure that the GCA remains a strong and effective safeguard for the future of our food system. I look forward to other hon. Members' contributions and the Minister's response.

4.45 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I thank the hon. Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick) for his fantastic speech. I draw the House's attention to my role as the chair of the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union parliamentary group, which I thank for its helpful briefing.

As we have heard, the UK grocery sector is shaped to a large extent by the huge concentration of power in the hands of the major supermarket retailers, which are competing to achieve the lowest prices and the biggest profit margins on key goods, but there is a limit to suppliers' ability to keep prices down through productivity, automation or cheaper input costs. The story that the hon. Member told was about the pressures faced by farmers, but there is also often a relentless downwards pressure on labour costs, which has led to attacks on the pay and conditions of workers employed across supply chains. This race to the bottom has resulted in a proliferation of low-paid and casualised jobs, and the growing exploitation of agency and migrant workers.

Surveys of food workers conducted by the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union show that in-work poverty has spiralled in recent years, with food workers worrying about feeding themselves and their families. At the same time, staggeringly, the supermarket chains have continued to report huge profits and dividend payouts to their shareholders. We have also seen rocket and feather pricing: because of wholesale cost rises, the price of key items is increased excessively, but when those wholesale costs come down, the price on the shelf does not come down in tandem.

The role of the Groceries Code Adjudicator is therefore an important one. The GCA has helped to tackle some of the most abusive practices, such as unreasonable

short-notice terminations of contracts, abusive promotional practices and other failures of compliance with the code. But sadly, as it stands, the GCA cannot intervene to protect suppliers or consumers when it comes to supermarket pricing. This puts the short-term interests of shareholders above the wider public interest.

In this context, I have a few suggestions for the Minister to consider. First, the existing powers of the GCA should be incorporated within the remit of a new groceries regulatory authority, with a wider responsibility to protect the sustainability of UK suppliers and the interests of consumers. The new regulator should be given the power to introduce price floors and ceilings to protect suppliers and consumers from aggressive pricing tactics and exploitative price-gouging. Secondly, a sectoral collective bargaining framework for workers employed in the UK food supply chain should be restored and extended, to ensure decent pay and security. Finally, a statutory right to food should be introduced in UK legislation, to protect consumers and address the root causes of food insecurity.

I will finish by drawing Members' attention to another matter of concern, which is the impact of private equity acquisitions on UK supermarket chains and food manufacturers. As FoodChain magazine recently put it,

"Under private equity ownership, the strategic focus often shifts towards short-term profitability, which can lead to decisions that are not always aligned with long-term market positioning. For example, cost-cutting measures may involve reducing staff, limiting store refurbishments, and cutting back on product variety."

There are a couple of examples of major supermarket chains engaging in those practices recently, and many fear that it is just the tip of the iceberg. To that end, I would also be grateful if the Minister considered launching a joint investigation, across the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Department for Business and Trade and the Competition and Markets Authority, about the impact of private equity acquisitions of UK grocery retailers on the security and sustainability of the UK food supply chain.

4.50 pm

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick) on an excellent and eloquent speech, which covered all the issues. I also thank the hon. Member for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey) for contributing very tellingly.

My background in this subject is that, from 2002, I chaired what was known as the Grocery Market Action Group, which had among its members the National Farmers Union, the Country Land and Business Association, ActionAid, Traidcraft, Friends of the Earth and others. It was amazing to have such a disparate group of organisations in the same room, actually working together and agreeing 100% about the injustices and dysfunctionality of the way in which the grocery supply chain was operating.

We presented a range of evidence to the Competition Commission. That ultimately provoked an investigation in 2008, which resulted in the commission proposing the establishment of a groceries code to drive fair trade through the supply chain. The Groceries Code Adjudicator was created to enforce the code and ensure that it was applied by those supermarkets. In those days, only

five had a turnover in excess of £1 billion, which was the recommendation of the Competition Commission at that stage.

Having done that, and having worked for over a decade to get the legislation through, I obviously have some skin in the game, which I probably need to declare. I am not trying to claim the credit myself, because it was a cross-party effort.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): Why not? Go on!

Andrew George: Well, I suppose I should—no, I will not. One stands on the shoulders of giants, and Colin Breed did a tremendous amount of work from 1997 to 2001. He produced an excellent report called "Checking out the Supermarkets", which laid a lot of the groundwork for the Grocery Market Action Group. Albert Owen, David Drew and other Labour Members were also very supportive and active throughout those years. There was not always cross-party agreement, or even agreement within my own party, that we should intervene in the market in the way that was proposed. We had to win that argument, and ultimately we did.

At the end of the day, the justification for why the Groceries Code Adjudicator, or any kind of market intervention of that nature, was needed, was that, fundamentally, we had a dysfunctional supply chain operating largely to the benefit of the supermarkets. Not all of our agricultural sector was benefiting from European subsidies or any other public subsidies in those days, but it had become dependent on subsidies because the market was so dysfunctional that public money was needed to prop up the whole system. If we have a functioning market, one can enable the agricultural sector to free itself from dependence on public subsidy. That was largely what was behind what we were trying to do in those days.

When the Groceries Code Adjudicator was established and the code was created, the intention then was only that it would create a framework in which future Governments would review its progress and then build on the framework by introducing or reducing regulations. Certainly the framework was to provide the skeleton on which further developments could happen; of course one cannot anticipate all circumstances.

I want to follow up on the points made by the hon. Member for Salford and my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe. There are a number of improvements that I hope the Government will look at very closely. For example, the code should be applied throughout the supply chain, not just to the direct supplier to the supermarket. It was never the intention of the Grocery Market Action Group that the adjudicator should look only at the final transaction between the ultimate supplier to the supermarket and the supermarket itself, because the impact of that contract could be fed right down through the supply chain.

The second point concerned third-country suppliers. The reason why Traidcraft, the Fairtrade Foundation and so on were involved is because they were rightly hoping that third countries could be involved. Then, as my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe said, the adjudicator could launch its own investigation on the basis of market intelligence. Finally, it could work alongside the Gangmasters and Labour

[Andrew George]

Abuse Authority, for example, to use its intelligence to take matters forward. Fundamentally, we have a framework that can be developed and improved. It certainly should not depend on seconded staff. We do not get commitment to the cause if we depend entirely on seconded staff, as my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe said. I hope the Minister will look carefully at this. Thank you very much, Mr Twigg, for allowing me to speak.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): We have just two more Members left to speak, but I want to call the Front-Bench spokespeople no later than 5.08 pm.

4.57 pm

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): What a pleasure it is to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Twigg. I thank the hon. Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick) for securing this debate on such an important issue.

I spent the whole of last Monday during the recess visiting farms across my constituency, from the edge of Lichfield all the way up to Kingstone. Several of the dairy farmers I met last week raised with me, independently and without prompting, the need to see dairy processors covered by the groceries supply code of practice. Independently, they said that one of the things that we can do to encourage and improve profitability in dairy farming is to ensure that the code is applied to those processors—the middlemen who buy their milk from the farmers and sell it on to supermarkets.

The code is designed to ensure that farmers get a fair deal, but because it applies only to those retailers with an annual turnover of £1 billion or more, the 14 biggest supermarkets are covered but some third parties that supply the supermarkets are not in its scope. British farmers, whether they are dairy farmers or from any other part of the industry where there are different processes, must get that fair deal. That is what the code and the adjudicator were set up to establish, and we should ensure that we carry that forwards so that every single farmer gets a fair deal.

One thing that strikes me is that the NFU's call to expand the coverage of the code by decreasing the turnover limit from £1 billion would mean that a lot of those processes would be covered. I am interested to hear the Minister's remarks on that, because that is a non-fiscal intervention we can make that can drive profitability significantly in the farming sector and support the people who feed the nation.

4.59 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): The hon. Member for St Ives (Andrew George) should not be so self-deprecating. The Groceries Code Adjudicator was brought about by an excellent piece of work and a good campaign. It was possibly the only thing of any worth that the Lib Dems did in government with the Conservatives.

I just want to make a couple of brief points because my hon. Friends the Members for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey) and for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) and others have covered the ground very well. I am a member of the bakers union group, too, and in 2013 we welcomed

the introduction of the Groceries Code Adjudicator. We met a few times to talk about the individual issues that occurred then. If hon. Members can remember, we raised the issue of low-cost production, particularly of bread, which was a result of supermarket pressure.

My hon. Friend the Member for Salford raised the issue of private equity. If we thought it was bad enough when there were individual supermarkets of sizeable status, we are now in a completely different world. Private equity is sweeping them up, exercising enormous power. I feel that the Government need to get ahead of the game. It is like the residential care sector before private equity took over and leveraged those individual companies. I can remember a number of them collapsing, and I think we are in exactly the same position here. That is why the call for an inquiry, bringing in all concerned partners, is invaluable. It is important to think through the implications and what regulation we can develop. The bakers union is calling for a new regulatory authority, because that would give more status and resources, as my hon. Friend pointed out. We need to understand the significance of what is happening in the field at the moment.

I want to make a second, brief point. The Minister here today is also responsible for the Employment Rights Bill that is going through Parliament. My hon. Friend the Member for Salford mentioned low pay. The bakers union survey found that 80% of its members were struggling to get by on basics such as rent, heat and food. There is a scandal on sick pay in this sector. The survey found that 37% of workers have to rely on statutory sick pay alone when they go off sick. Staggeringly, 13% received no sick pay at all. As a result, I believe some are forced into working when they are sick, which is the last thing anyone wants in this sector. It is important that the issue of sick pay is addressed in the Employment Rights Bill, which I think most people will welcome. I know amendments on that are being tabled as we speak and, in this sector, it could have a direct impact on the wellbeing of workers.

Finally, if we are to move forward, from the bakers union perspective the establishment of a regulatory authority is critical. How it is made democratically accountable is also important. Along with the engagement of farmers and supermarkets, it is key that workers are involved and represented through the unions involved in this sector, so that we can plan a long-term strategy for food production that is not based on low pay or exploitation of farmers.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): Order. Before I call the Front-Bench spokespeople, I should say that I will call the Minister no later than 20 past. I call the Lib Dem spokesperson, Tim Farron.

5.4 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your guidance this afternoon, Mr Twigg. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick) for bringing this important issue to this place and for making an excellent speech.

There have been great speeches from all the speakers so far, with a number of interesting and useful interventions. The five hon. Members who have spoken all made good points that I want to endorse. My hon. Friend the

Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe spoke about imbalance in the market with large numbers of producers—1,500 farmers in my constituency alone and thousands across the country—and 12 retailers making up 95% of the sector. That is an incredible imbalance of power. Others have also referred to the greater depth to the industry in the supply chain than the Groceries Code Adjudicator is allowed to give credit for. My hon. Friend talked of the impact on farmers of potential delisting, the impact of late payments, having to pay for waste, and all the things that many have to struggle with.

The hon. Member for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey) made a great speech, emphasising the power those retailers have in the market and its irrational nature, which leads to farmers and producers of all kinds going out of business just because the large, powerful entities who own our supermarkets can make that happen in order to maximise their own profits.

My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Andrew George) absolutely deserves credit. I first heard the phrase “supermarket ombudsman” from his lips before I entered this place. When he was doing the job I am now doing—being the Liberal Democrats DEFRA spokesperson—he fought hard for that ombudsman, and that is the reason why, in the coalition agreement, what became the Groceries Code Adjudicator came to pass. It was introduced by Liberal Democrat Ministers including my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), Vince Cable and Jo Swinson, who were involved in the Department.

The hon. Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) rightly talked about processors. They are significant and are often untouched by the arm of the Groceries Code Adjudicator. The right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) talked about the role of ownership in the sector and the unfairness that affects the workforce in the retail sector, as well as the producers who supply to it. There is an important point for us to remember here. Those who are at the wrong end of the abuse of power in the food supply chain are processors in broadly rural communities and workers in broadly urban communities; they have a lot more in common than we are sometimes allowed to think.

The Groceries Code Adjudicator is one of the things that came from the coalition of which the Liberal Democrats can be rightly proud. It was motivated in no small part by the simple reality that many producers—many farmers—were being paid less than the cost of production for their produce. Most notably in my constituency in Westmorland, but elsewhere in the country, that means those working in the dairy sector, but there are many others besides.

As with all things in the coalition, there were compromises. Even the good things we got were often watered down and were not what they might have been had we had what will one day obviously happen, that is, a majority Liberal Democrat Government. There are three particular areas of weakness with the Groceries Code Adjudicator, which we passionately believe should be addressed in the interests of our farmers, producers and consumers alike.

First, the reach of the adjudicator is too small, particularly its ability to investigate across the range of people involved in the sector. As has been mentioned, the adjudicator can investigate direct supply arrangements between farmers and retailers, but cannot get involved

in the enormous majority of the food chain—that is, in the processing sector, and the middle people within the market. The Groceries Code Adjudicator should be given that ability. That is obvious.

The second point is about protecting farmers and other producers from the reprisals that they fear they will get if they refer something to the adjudicator. Members of Parliament, the National Farmers Union—local branches in Kendal and Appleby, and the NFU across the whole country—the Tenant Farmers Association and other advocates should be allowed to make referrals to the Groceries Code Adjudicator so that farmers do not feel that they have to do so themselves while fearing the reprisals, which they clearly do. We strongly support that idea.

Finally, there is the issue of resource, which has been mentioned by other people. The team is seven-strong, including the adjudicator themselves four days a week. That is not right. However wonderful those people are, they can be run rings around by the enormously powerful supermarkets.

The unfettered free market is indifferent to Britain's food security, and we need to be not indifferent. We need to decide that it is of ultimate importance and that we therefore need to referee the market powerfully to protect our food security. Over the last 20 years, we have seen 30,000 farm holdings cease to be—a 22.7% reduction in the number of farms in the United Kingdom. That is undermining our ability to feed ourselves. Now, only 55% of Britain's food is produced by farmers in the United Kingdom. If we are serious about food security, we are going to have to put that right.

The Liberal Democrats are challenging the Government over the family farm tax—we would scrap it—which is suppressing production and creating unfairness in the market. There is a 76% reduction in the basic payment this year, undermining small family farmers in particular, in Westmorland and beyond. DEFRA officials told the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee the other week that they expect 92% to 93% of farms to survive the environmental land management transition—so, 7% to 8% will not survive that transition. The land use framework, which I welcome in principle, will in practice potentially take productive farm land out of usage. All of that leads us towards a situation where the UK is less food secure.

The overdue Groceries Code Adjudicator reforms are not just vital to ensuring British farmers are treated fairly, which they must be; they are about underpinning the vitality of food security in this country, which is essentially national security. A country that cannot feed itself is not safe.

5.10 pm

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick) on securing the debate. It will perhaps come as news to him that I, too, was one of the people who voted for the Groceries Code Adjudicator. I was a Member during the coalition Government and it was put on the statute book back in 2013 because our farmers wanted an adjudicator to tackle the imbalance between small producers of food and big supermarket buyers. We will always back our farmers for fairness and equity for food producers.

[*Dame Harriett Baldwin*]

The adjudicator regulates relationships between the UK's largest grocery retailers and their direct suppliers, and it ensures that excessive risks and unexpected costs are not unfairly transferred. It brings fairer prices to the farming community and provides a guardrail for those smaller food producers who do not have a voice in the complicated food production market. It is funded by a pragmatic levy on designated retailers, with a UK annual turnover of more than £1 billion. There are currently 14 retailers covered by the code.

The results from the annual survey in 2024 show that the adjudicator is making a difference. More than 3,000 responses to that survey show that the number of suppliers experiencing a code issue has fallen to 33% and that the number of suppliers highlighting a retailer's response to a cost price increase as an issue almost halved, falling from 28% in 2023 to just 16%. For the first time, the Co-op came top of the 14 retailers for overall code compliance, at 98%. The Co-op and Lidl both experienced a 2% improvement, which was the biggest percentage improvement across the 14 retailers.

The adjudicator is there to protect suppliers, such as our precious farmers. However, we are concerned that the Government's recent actions have done anything but protect our farmers. Food retailers and suppliers of all sizes are under huge pressure because of Labour's tax on jobs, its increasing red tape around jobs, food inflation and job losses in supermarkets. Labour's family farm tax is yet another blow. It is a death tax on important family businesses. With no farmers in the UK, there would be no UK-grown food. Under Labour, the family farm will wither and die unless the Chancellor can be persuaded to change her mind.

Food producers are at the heart of our communities and the Government should be doing everything they can to support them, not harm them, and to ensure food security in this country. The attack on our farmers is shocking in every way. The Labour MPs who voted for an inheritance tax on family farms simply do not understand where their food comes from. Labour is harming our farms, not prioritising our rural areas. It simply does not understand.

The Conservatives believe that good policy needs to be created in collaboration with the farming industry, rather than in isolation. We have always kept the Groceries Code Adjudicator under review since its inception and we urge the Government to continue to do so.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): If the Minister can leave a bit of time at the end for David Chadwick to wind up, that would be great.

5.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders): Certainly, Mr Twigg. It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon. I thank the hon. Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick) for securing this important debate.

Before I talk about hon. Members' contributions, it is worth reminding the House of the role of the Groceries Code Adjudicator. Hon. Members obviously have a great deal of understanding of what it does, but it is important to put on the record its limits, which a number of Members

referred to. In primary colours, its role is to enforce the groceries supply code of practice by providing advice and guidance to suppliers and large retailers on matters relating to the code; arbitrating in disputes between large retailers and their direct suppliers; investigating issues to ascertain whether there has been non-compliance with the code; and imposing sanctions and other remedies for breach of the code.

The code applies to the 14 largest grocery retailers in the UK, which have an annual turnover of £1 billion or more. Some Members spoke about changing that threshold—I would be interested to see what the effect would be—but it has been in place for some time. The competition measure is owned by the Competition and Markets Authority, and was put in place following a very detailed market investigation in 2008, which found that direct suppliers of groceries to large supermarkets faced unfair risks that adversely affected competition and, ultimately, consumers. As the hon. Member for St Ives (Andrew George) and others mentioned, it was in no small part due to a great deal of campaigning from a number of groups and hon. Members that the code saw the light of day.

The code regulates designated retailers' dealings with their direct suppliers, which, as we have heard, do not include all the farmers and primary producers. Although it prevents the unilateral variation of supply agreements without notice, puts limits on seeking payments for wastage and requires retailers to pay for goods on time, it does not regulate the prices agreed between retailers and suppliers, which is a commercial negotiation between the two parties. However, it requires that such negotiations be conducted fairly and transparently, and the GCA has been keen to ensure that negotiations around cost price pressures do not lead to non-compliance with the code. In 2022, the GCA published the seven golden rules to remind retailers of best practice when agreeing prices with suppliers, and all the regulated retailers have signed up to them.

As we have heard, the GCA was established in June 2013, and since then there has been strong evidence to show that it has been effective in promoting compliance with the code and in changing retailers' behaviour to improve fairness for direct suppliers. Improvements in retailer compliance with the code are evident from the annual survey. Average compliance with the code has increased from 75% in 2014, when the code was introduced, to 91% in 2024. It is also positive to see that among suppliers there is a high level of awareness of the GCA and the code itself, although I noted that the hon. Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe said that there is a question about awareness among some farmers, and I am happy to explore that further with him.

Moreover, all three statutory reviews of the effectiveness of the GCA concluded that it has been a highly effective regulator. The next review will commence after 31 March, and will look at the performance over the past three years, from 2022 to 2025. Given what we have heard today, I encourage hon. Members and their constituents to contribute to it. The hon. Gentleman raised concerns about the adjudicator's remit and resources, and there will be an opportunity for him to feed those comments into the review.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned what he described as bullying by supermarkets. A number of hon. Members talked about a fear of reprisals for raising concerns,

and we obviously take that very seriously. It is important to note that the GCA has a statutory requirement to maintain supplier confidentiality. It has relaunched the Code Confident campaign and a confidential reporting platform called “Tell the GCA”, and published a code compliance officer commitment to confidentiality. The 2024 annual survey reported that 82% of suppliers were aware of its commitment to confidentiality. That is a good report, but obviously 18% were unaware of it, and clearly there is a perception out there that matters can find their way back to the supermarkets, which is something we can look further into.

The hon. Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe and a number of others questioned why the GCA cannot instigate its own investigations. I am told that it can carry out investigations of its own accord if it has reasonable grounds to suspect that a large retailer has broken the code or failed to follow a recommendation following a previous investigation by the adjudicator. It is for the adjudicator to determine how he uses his powers, and he has issued statutory guidance setting out his criteria for launching an investigation. The adjudicator’s four prioritisation principles ensure that he targets resources effectively and proportionately. Impact, strategic importance, risk and benefits, and resources are all part of those principles.

Andrew George: The Minister is certainly right, providing the investigation was on sound grounds. The worry was always that the investigation may identify a supplier simply by doing it, and that the anonymity intended when an intelligence-driven inquiry or investigation was generated may uncover that particular supplier. Therefore, a wider range of powers—not on the basis of being able to conduct fishing expeditions—to investigate on justifiable grounds is something that I hope the Minister will look at further.

Justin Madders: I hear what the hon. Member has said, and no doubt that is something that can be put in as part of the review. When I spoke to the adjudicator, he said that his approach is about ensuring compliance and helping to prevent problems from escalating in the first place, avoiding the need for formal investigations and dispute resolution. He has said that he is satisfied that his current powers provide the necessary tools to enforce the code and change retailer behaviour. He has also been clear—and has said publicly—that if he needs to instigate an investigation he is more than ready to do so.

That leads on to some of the points Members made about the resources of the adjudicator. My information is that there are actually nine staff rather than seven, but the overall point is that that does not seem to be a great deal, given the number of supermarkets and the purchasing power that we are talking about. But it is entirely within the adjudicator’s gift to ask for more resources through the levy. If he feels he needs more, he can also talk to the CMA about secondments—that is something that is entirely up to him. If there is a question that things are not happening because of resources, I am confident that the adjudicator would come forward and discuss that with us.

My hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey) rightly referenced her leadership of the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union parliamentary group, and I am proud to associate myself with that group,

having represented it on many occasions in my former legal career. I know how much it has done in this area, and how this area affects its members. My hon. Friend was right to talk about how that sector is often characterised by a race to the bottom, with insecurity and low wages. That is what we hope to tackle through the Employment Rights Bill.

My hon. Friend the Member for Salford also made a number of interesting suggestions about how we move forward, which I will not be able to respond to in detail today, but I note that the Business and Trade Committee has recently begun an investigation into pricing practices. It focuses primarily on dynamic pricing, but the evidence session I attended covered a range of areas where prices were an issue. That report is something I will look forward to reading in due course.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) also referred to the use of private equity in the supermarket sector, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Salford. He was right to reference other sectors where that has become more of an issue. The CMA has recently looked at that issue in the veterinary sector, so it may be that it has the opportunity to conduct an inquiry, should it wish to do so. My right hon. Friend mentioned a survey in which 13% of respondents had no access to sick pay. We think that that is absolutely wrong, and that is why the Employment Rights Bill will ensure that statutory sick pay becomes a day one right for everyone, regardless of their earnings.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) talked about how dairy farmers in his constituency would like the GCA to apply to their work. He may be aware that the Fair Dealing Obligations (Milk) Regulations 2024 came into force in July last year, and will apply to all existing contracts from 9 July this year. I will pass his comments to the relevant Minister in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to see whether those regulations will assist in dealing with his constituents’ issues. DEFRA is also looking at powers in the Agriculture Act 2020 to see whether expanded regulations could improve fairness in the pig sector, as well as looking at the egg and fresh produce sectors. There are therefore a number of tools at our disposal to tackle some of the issues that Members have raised.

The dairy regulations are enforced by the Agricultural Supply Chain Adjudicator, Richard Thompson, who was appointed last summer. We expect that in future he will deal with any fair dealing regulations in the other sectors that I have mentioned. It is important to note that ASCA and GCA are in regular contact to ensure that the two regimes operate effectively alongside one another. We will conduct a review to understand the effectiveness of the fair dealing regulations.

As I have already mentioned, there will also be the triennial review of the GCA. Hon. Members have spoken with great knowledge and passion about a number of issues that they would wish to put forward, particularly about the GCA’s remit and powers. I encourage them to do so, and we will see what the review takes forward. The points made about the importance of this country’s food security and fairness to consumers and producers are absolutely right. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe on securing the debate.

5.27 pm

David Chadwick: I thank the Minister for his response and his particularly generous offer to listen to further contributions about how we can strengthen the GCA.

I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. The hon. Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) talked about the issues facing dairy farmers, which are also relevant in my constituency, and the hon. Member for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey) and the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) talked about the impact on the Bakers, Food and Allied Workers Union and people employed in that industry. That is a reminder of just how far-reaching the food system is for us all. It is particularly important for farmers and primary producers, but the importance of properly regulating those relationships extends further than just those areas.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for St Ives (Andrew George) and for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) for their contributions. I am sure that they will join me in commending Roger Williams, the former Liberal Democrat MP for Brecon and Radnorshire, for the part that he played in securing the Groceries Code Adjudicator.

There is clearly broad consensus that the introduction of the Groceries Code Adjudicator has been a positive step forward for British farmers. Fairness in the agricultural supply chain is essential and benefits us all, whether we are consumers, farmers or communities relying on local produce. It is still my firm belief that we must do more to strengthen the current regulations and improve the resources behind them. We cannot afford to sit back and allow the power imbalance between producers and retailers to persist. We need to ensure that bullying behaviour by large corporations becomes a thing of the past.

There is still so much work to be done, and I am committed to continuing, throughout this Parliament, to press the Government to introduce stronger measures to protect farmers and producers, who are the cornerstone of rural communities and the rural economy that they support. Let us continue to work together to create a fairer and more sustainable food system that uplifts everyone, from the fields to the supermarket shelves.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Groceries Code Adjudicator.

5.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 25 February 2025

DEFENCE

Ministry of Defence Contingency Fund Advance: 2024-25

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey): The Ministry of Defence new cash requirement for the year exceeds that provided by the main estimate 2024-25. The supplementary estimate has not yet received Royal Assent.

The Contingencies Fund advance is required to meet commitments until the supplementary estimate receives Royal Assent, at which point the Ministry of Defence will be able to draw down the cash from the Consolidated Fund in the usual way, to repay the Contingencies Fund advance.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £250,000,000 and £250,000,000 of capital will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Ministry of Defence. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £500,000,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

This is separate and additional to the advance sought on 6 January 2025 to fund the transaction to purchase 36,347 properties from Annington Property Ltd.

[HCWS468]

Service Police Complaints Commissioner Annual Report 2023

The Minister for Veterans and People (Al Carns): I am pleased to place in the Library of the House today the Ministry of Defence's formal response to the Service Police Complaints Commissioner's annual report for 2023.

The Commissioner's inaugural report assesses the delivery of her functions and the work of her office in 2023. The response sets out the MOD's comments on the report and approach to each of the three recommendations made by the Commissioner.

The MOD values the strong independent oversight that the Commissioner brings to the Service Police complaints process and is committed to having a system that our personnel can have trust and confidence in.

Attachments can be viewed online at:
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2025-02-25/HCWS467>

[HCWS467]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

NFU Conference: Farm Profitability

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Reed): Today at the NFU conference, I made several announcements to make farming more profitable:

Extending the Seasonal Worker visa route for five more years will give farms a pipeline of workers and certainty to grow their businesses. Annual quota reviews will ensure we strike the right balance—supporting farms while gradually reducing visa numbers as we develop alternative solutions.

Backing British produce: there are now requirements for Government catering contracts to favour high-quality, high-welfare products that local farms and producers are well placed to provide. The move marks a major leap in achieving the Government's ambition for at least 50% of food supplied into the £5 billion public sector catering contracts to be from British producers or those certified to higher environmental standards.

Investment of £110 million in technology: the Farming Innovation Programme supports research and development of agri-technology for farmers, for example, the chemical-free cleaning for integrated milking equipment, which lowers energy costs and chemical use. The Farming Equipment and Technology Fund provides grants of up to £25,000 to buy new equipment such as electric weeders to reduce chemical use.

Protecting farmers in trade deals: the Government will uphold and protect our high environmental and animal welfare standards in future trade deals.

Strengthening Britain's biosecurity: transforming the Animal and Plant Health Agency animal health facility at Weybridge into a National Biosecurity Centre, and investing £200 million to improve our resilience against animal disease to protect farmers and food producers.

As I said at the Oxford Farming Conference in January, more profitable, sustainable farm businesses will ensure our nation's long-term food security. The Government have an important role in creating the conditions for growth and maintaining the resilient production of high-quality food the British public depends on.

[HCWS469]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Independent Reporting Commission: Seventh Report

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): Today I am laying before Parliament the seventh report from the Independent Reporting Commission (IRC).

The commission was established following the Fresh Start agreement in November 2015 to report on progress towards ending paramilitary activity. The agreement set out the Northern Ireland Executive's commitments around tackling paramilitary activity and associated criminality, and led to a programme of work to deliver a Northern Ireland Executive action plan.

In the New Decade, New Approach agreement in January 2020, a commitment was made to continue this work, including through a second phase of the Northern Ireland Executive's programme on paramilitarism, criminality and organised crime.

In this seventh report, which covers 2024, the commission notes that interventions through the Executive programme, alongside policing and criminal justice measures which work to tackle paramilitary criminality, are having a

tangible effect on the communities where paramilitaries operate. But the IRC also notes significant concerns relating to continuing paramilitary-linked harms such as intimidation, coercive control, and threats.

The commission has set out a number of recommendations on how the effort to tackle paramilitarism and its continued impact in communities can be improved. It also asks the Northern Ireland Executive, the UK Government and the Government of Ireland to ensure that work to tackle paramilitarism remains a high priority beyond the lifetime of the Executive programme.

The commission has again suggested that the UK Government and the Government of Ireland should appoint an independent person to scope out the potential for, and explore what might be involved in, a process to end paramilitarism.

The UK Government and the Government of Ireland have been giving consideration to how progress could be made towards ending paramilitarism, and to the recommendations from the IRC and others, including the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on this issue. In April 2024, the then UK Government and the Government of Ireland committed to taking forward further work.

The two Governments have agreed to jointly appoint, in the period ahead, within the existing IRC legislative framework, an independent expert to carry out a short scoping and engagement exercise to assess whether there is merit in, and support for, a formal process of engagement to bring about paramilitary group transition to disbandment. This will include examining what could be in the scope of such a formal process.

I want to be clear that this is not the start of a formal process itself. This scoping exercise is also not a part of, or an alternative to, the existing law enforcement and criminal justice measures and the wider effort through the Executive programme to tackle the ongoing violence and harm caused by paramilitary groups. I also want to be clear that no financial offer will be made to paramilitary groups or to the individuals involved in them in exchange for an end to violence and ongoing harms.

I will be writing to the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee to set out more detail on this.

I would like to express my thanks to the commissioners and the secretariat for their continued work in reporting on progress towards ending paramilitarism.

[HCWS470]

Written Corrections

Tuesday 25 February 2025

Ministerial Corrections

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Data (Use and Access) Bill [Lords]

The following extracts are from Second Reading of the Data (Use and Access) Bill [Lords] on 12 February 2025.

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): ...The measure on the NHS and data is among the most positive in the Bill, and was welcomed by everybody today. It was not in the previous version of the Bill; it is one of our additions.

[*Official Report*, 12 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 345.]

Written correction submitted by the Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms, the hon. Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant):

The Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms (Chris Bryant): ... The measure on the NHS and data is among the most positive in the Bill, and was welcomed by everybody today. **It was in the previous version of the Bill.**

Chris Bryant: ...I can announce that we have set up two working groups in the past week, both of which have people from the creative industries and from the AI companies in them. One is specifically looking at transparency and what that looks like to be effective and proportionate, and it will start work on that next week.

[*Official Report*, 12 February 2025; Vol. 762, c. 349.]

Written correction submitted by the Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms:

Chris Bryant: ...I can announce that **we will be setting up** two working groups, both of which **will** have people from the creative industries and from the AI companies in them. **One will look** specifically at transparency and what that looks like to be effective and proportionate.

EDUCATION

Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill

The following extract is from the fifth sitting of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Public Bill Committee on 28 January 2025.

Catherine McKinnell: As hon. Members have rightly said, it is really important that care leavers are supported to get into education, employment or training—the right hon. Member for East Hampshire clearly said that as well. That is why a care leaver who starts an apprenticeship may be entitled to a £3,000 bursary, why local authorities must provide a £2,000 bursary for care leavers who go to university, and why care leavers may be entitled to a 16-to-19 bursary if they stay in further education.

[*Official Report, Children's Wellbeing and Schools Public Bill Committee*, 28 January 2025; c. 189.]

Written correction submitted by the Minister for School Standards, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell):

Catherine McKinnell: As hon. Members have rightly said, it is really important that care leavers are supported to get into education, employment or training—the right hon. Member for East Hampshire clearly said that as well. That is why a care leaver who starts an apprenticeship may be entitled to a £3,000 bursary, why local authorities **can** provide a £2,000 bursary for **eligible** care leavers who go to university, and why care leavers may be entitled to a 16-to-19 bursary if they stay in further education.

ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 25 February 2025

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