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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Monday 24 March 2025

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

ELECTORAL COMMISSION (ANSWER TO ADDRESS)

The COMPTROLLER OF HIS MAJESTY'S HOUSEHOLD reported to the House, That the Address of 4 March, praying that His Majesty will re-appoint Dame Elan Closs Stephens as an Electoral Commissioner with effect from 13 March 2025 for the period ending on 12 March 2027, was presented to His Majesty, who was graciously pleased to comply with the request.

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Service Accommodation

1. **Lillian Jones** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve housing for military personnel and their families. [903339]

5. **Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): What steps he is taking to improve the quality of accommodation for service families. [903344]

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey): On behalf of the House, I would like to mark the passing of Group Captain John “Paddy” Hemingway, the last surviving battle of Britain pilot—one of those strikingly few brave young men who turned the tide of the war and kept our nation safe from Nazi invasion.

The fire sale of military family homes by Conservative Ministers in 1996 was probably the worst privatisation ever. The Government were paying £600,000 a day to rent back the homes and then paying all the repair costs, with no power to plan or to do the major upgrades needed. We bought back 36,000 forces homes in January, we started the defence housing review in February, and we aim to publish our housing plans in the summer.

Lillian Jones: I thank my right hon. Friend for that response. The men and women of our armed forces perform the ultimate public service. They and their families make considerable sacrifices to keep all of us in the UK safe and secure. Does he agree that the least we owe our servicemen and women is decent housing that they can proudly call home?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is right; the sacrifice that those who serve in uniform make to keep us all safe is exceptional. The least that their families deserve is a decent home—it is, after all, the heart of all our lives. The steps we have taken with the buy-back of the Annington homes is a decisive break with the past, and we will now put in place the necessary plans to upgrade forces family homes for the future.

Clive Jones: The Ministry of Defence owns more than 300 houses in the former Arborfield garrison in my constituency. Only a handful of them are occupied by service families; the remainder are let privately. But increasingly they are being left vacant, which, with the estate not being maintained, is affecting the lives of constituents. I am told that no decisions can be taken on the future of the site until a housing strategy is completed. Can the MOD make an early decision on the Arborfield housing, to stop the neglect and return much-needed, affordable housing to the market?

John Healey: If the hon. Gentleman writes to me with the specifics, I will certainly look into that. He sets out for the House the character of some of the neglect and decline that we have seen in our forces housing for so long, and the bind that previous Governments have been in, without the power or control to make the upgrades and plan for wholesale renewal for the future. That is what our housing review will start to fix. We cannot fix these deep-seated, long-running problems overnight, but we are determined to do better than we have done in the past.

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State reassure forces families in North Durham that the Labour Government are ending the previous Conservative Government's failed approach of papering over the cracks, and are instead taking action to deliver new, high-quality family homes for our service personnel over the years to come?

John Healey: I can indeed. My hon. Friend and I stood on a manifesto, on which we were elected as a Government, that committed to ending the scandal of forces family homes. The buy-back that we have put in place is the start of delivering on that promise for armed forces families and delivering, as we are doing on a number of fronts, for defence.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): The litany of complaints I receive from service families in accommodation in Gosport include damp, black mould, unsafe electrical wiring and waste water flowing into homes. One constituent wrote to me that:

“The overall condition of our flat is unfit for purpose, unhygienic and quite frankly a threat to our safety.”

This has been going on for decades, under successive Governments, and our service people and their families quite simply deserve better. What I want to know from the Secretary of State, on behalf of my constituents, is when we will begin to see tangible differences. Pinnacle and VIVO are not fit for purpose; when will we see them replaced with an organisation that can do those repairs, and do them properly? I invite him to visit Gosport to see some of that appalling service family accommodation for himself.

John Healey: The hon. Lady is right; it is shameful. Her Government had 14 years to fix the problem; we are now doing that job. We have a policy in place that means that no one should be let a home with apparent damp and mould problems. There is a special, dedicated report line for those problems, and if they are severe, service families should be offered alternative accommodation. The defence housing review, which is now under way and will report in the summer, will set out plans for a long-term overhaul of these deep-seated problems, which are overdue and have been neglected.

Military Aid to Ukraine

2. **Sir Ashley Fox** (Bridgwater) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure that UK military aid is adequate to meet Ukraine's capability requirements. [903340]

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey): As a new Government, we stepped up and speeded up the delivery of UK military aid to Ukraine. This year the UK will provide £4.5 billion in military support, the highest ever sum. We are fully behind President Trump's pledge to bring a lasting peace to Ukraine, and we want to see success in today's talks, but we will not jeopardise the peace by forgetting about the war.

Sir Ashley Fox: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his answer. Over the weekend, President Trump's special envoy dismissed the Prime Minister's plan for an international force to support the ceasefire in Ukraine, calling it

"a posture and a pose".

Whatever the wisdom of those remarks, does the Secretary of State see a future in which UK forces could deploy on peacekeeping operations in Ukraine without a US security guarantee?

John Healey: As the Chief of the Defence Staff said over the weekend, no one should doubt that the work that the UK is leading with France to pull together a coalition of nations willing to step in and help ensure lasting peace in any negotiated settlement in Ukraine is critical and substantial. The UK is determined and will lead that effort.

Tom Rutland (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): This year, the UK is providing Ukraine with more financial aid through military support than at any time since Putin's illegal invasion. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is crucial to wider European security, and to our own security here in the UK, that we continue to support Ukraine and ramp up the pressure on Putin?

John Healey: I do indeed. Putting the Ukrainians in the strongest possible position as they choose to go into discussions is part of the responsibility and commitment of this Government. We plan very closely with Ukraine the support we provide, and our 2025 plan to support Ukraine has been developed with the Ukrainians and reflects what they need most: drones, air defences and ammunition. That is why this month the Prime Minister announced a £1.6 billion deal to supply more than 5,000 lightweight multi-role missiles for air defence that were built in the UK, both backing the Ukrainians in their fight and boosting British jobs and business.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): In this age, when the plot of "The Manchurian Candidate" appears more like a documentary on US politics than a work of fiction, have the Government received any indication that their efforts militarily to support Ukraine would be actively opposed or blocked by the Trump Administration?

John Healey: The Prime Minister has made it clear that, in the context of a negotiated peace, the security arrangements or guarantees in Ukraine will need US support. I have made the same point strongly in my discussions with Secretary Hegseth. As Defence Secretary, my job now is to put Ukraine in the strongest possible position by continuing levels of UK military aid, encouraging other nations to do more, and developing—alongside the French—plans for multinational support to maintain the long-term security of any peace in Ukraine.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Rochdale's Ukrainian community is fervently proud of what the Prime Minister has done in recent weeks, and not just on the diplomatic front but with the record support for Ukraine militarily. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is important to call out the Russian lies and propaganda that have been propagated of late, including the lie that somehow Ukraine is not a real country, but a fake country, and to call out the lie that Britain's security does not also depend on Ukraine's security?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is right. The first line of defence for the UK and for Europe is in Ukraine. The Ukrainians share our values and are fighting with huge courage—military and civilians alike. It is our job to stand with them during that fight to safeguard their future and their ability to make their own decisions as a country. If and when they go into the negotiations, we will stand with them then, and we will stand with them after a negotiated peace, which we all hope President Trump is capable of securing.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): May I associate the Opposition with the Secretary of State's remarks about Paddy Hemingway, the last of the few to whom we owe so much?

On the potential peacekeeping force for Ukraine, we have heard from the Secretary of State that it is jointly British and French. In fact, in every one of his answers he stressed the amount of work we are doing with France. Is it therefore not extraordinary that, at the very same time, France should be working to undermine our defence industry by having us excluded from a £150 billion European defence fund, which will include other non-EU states?

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman is clearly a glass-half-empty type of guy. The European Union, when it produced its defence and security white paper last week, set in place specific arrangements for any third nation, such as the UK, that strikes a defence and security partnership with the European Union. That is exactly what we went to the country with, promising to undertake that as a UK Government. Any country with a partnership in place then potentially has access to those sorts of programmes and that sort of funding, and that is what we will try to negotiate for this country and our industry.

James Cartledge: I can assure the Secretary of State that I am full biftas behind our armed forces and the UK defence industry. Is not the point that we provide our nuclear deterrent unconditionally to European NATO countries 24/7, our Army is in Estonia defending Europe's eastern flank, and we have done more than any other European nation to support Ukraine? Will the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister stand up to President Macron and stress to him that this is the worst possible time to prioritise fishing rights over Europe's collective security?

John Healey: I just ask the hon. Gentleman to drop that Brexit rhetoric. We are leading efforts with the French Government and the French military to meet the challenge of the US and the requirements of Ukraine to have a coalition of countries willing to stand with Ukraine in the context of a negotiated peace, to help them secure enduring stability and deterrence, to prevent Russia re-invading that sovereign country.

Support for Veterans

3. **Calum Miller** (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): What steps he is taking to ensure that veterans receive adequate support after leaving the armed forces. [903341]

19. **Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): What steps he is taking to ensure that veterans receive adequate support after leaving the armed forces. [903358]

The Minister for Veterans and People (Al Carns): I have always said that we train people to join the military and to be in the military, but we do not necessarily train them to be a civilian after they leave. That is why this Government have taken swift action to support veterans upon leaving. Last month I launched Operation Ascend, which will help veterans thrive into post-service careers. Our hugely successful career transition partnership has now seen 88% of all veterans leaving straight into employment since October. We have extended national insurance contributions relief from April 2026 for employers who recruit veterans. On top of that, this Government have awarded £3.7 million in veterans housing grants. I am a firm believer that over the past 14 years we did not take enough responsibility for supporting our veterans, and plans that we will unveil in the future will take a step in the right direction to improving that.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I recently visited the Heyford and Bicester veterans group in my constituency, which was set up by Ian Ridley to support fellow veterans throughout the region. This fantastic initiative brings together a range of services from charities, the NHS and local authorities to support veterans. However, when speaking to Ian, I was amazed to discover that the group receives no funding from the MOD, and that veterans in our region are not signposted to its services when they leave the armed forces. I therefore invite the Minister to visit the group with me and see the work that it does, so that we can discuss how to make it more routine for services such as those that it offers to be made available to our fantastic veterans.

Al Carns: I thank all the people, most of whom are probably volunteers, who are supporting veterans in the hon. Member's constituency. Two days ago I visited another tri-service veterans hub that is delivering, I think, exactly the same types of services. We often find that while there is a great deal support out there, it is difficult for veterans to navigate the process of finding the right place, and we are working on plans to help them with that.

Tom Gordon: Harrogate is a proud armed forces town and the location of the Army Foundation College, and Menwith Hill and Catterick are nearby. North Yorkshire as a whole plays an important part for our armed forces. Veterans in my constituency have told me that they often move back there after postings throughout their careers, but they then have problems accessing housing through the local authority. What conversations is the Minister having with local government colleagues to ensure that local authorities have a better understanding of how to listen to what veterans say about the adaptations they need?

Al Carns: As the hon. Member knows very well, access to social and affordable housing is a severe problem across the country. We work with many councils, explaining to them the covenant as a whole and the need for veterans to be fast-tracked. Op Fortitude is a prime example: there have been 3,000 referrals, and 825 veterans have been put into housing in a relatively short time. I would like to connect the hon. Member with that operation to ensure that we can point any veterans who need such support in the right direction.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): I visited Richard, a veteran, in his home, provided by the Derventio Housing Trust. The trust, based in Derby, offers homes for people without them, including those who have served in our armed forces. Volunteers from Derventio recently renovated a house in the city specifically for veterans. Does the Minister agree that such support is vital, and will he tell us what the Government are doing to help with the provision of housing, care and support for our veterans in need?

Al Carns: I congratulate the individuals in that trust on supporting the veterans in my hon. Friend's constituency. I have visited many different parts of the UK and observed the phenomenal volunteer support that veterans often have to rely on. We want to establish a structure that will focus that support and also direct veterans to the help that they need more quickly and effectively, and we will unveil our plans in due course.

Lola McEvoy (Darlington) (Lab): Will the Minister meet me, and other members of the all-party parliamentary group for the armed forces, to discuss rolling out the best practice of some fire authorities to give those who have served our country automatic interviews for relevant roles in the public sector? It is a brilliant idea that would really benefit my constituents, and I think that all those who have gone above and beyond to serve our country should be served by all of us upon their return.

Al Carns: That is a great initiative. Service beyond service is something that we should be promoting, and I will take that as best practice, have a look at it and see

whether we can roll it out across the nation, so that when people leave the military they can secure at least a first interview for a role in the fire service, the police, the NHS or any other public services.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Veterans who served in Northern Ireland will no doubt welcome the Veterans Minister's decision—first suggested by the shadow Defence Secretary—that the MOD should judicially review the recent coroner's verdict regarding the shooting of several IRA terrorists at Clonoe. Well done, I say, but why not go further to protect veterans, and drop the plans to revoke large parts of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023, which would only serve to facilitate yet more inquests of this type?

Al Carns: The right hon. Member makes an important point. Having visited Northern Ireland just two weeks ago, I share the concerns of many veterans who have served in Northern Ireland, particularly concerns about the misinterpretation of the challenging context in which many of these inquests and inquiries are taking place. I remind Members on both sides of the House that not so long ago, in the '70s, '80s and '90s, there were major explosions in every major city in the United Kingdom and assassinations across the UK. Killings were a regular event in Northern Ireland, and we sent our service personnel there to protect peace, save lives and, indeed, prevent a civil war.

Mr Francois: The Minister mentioned both sides of the House. Revoking the legacy Act would encourage a system of two-tier justice—one for our Army veterans and another for alleged IRA terrorists, including those given so-called letters of comfort by the Blair regime. With many of those veterans having served in proud regiments that traditionally recruited from red wall northern constituencies, why should a Labour Government assist Gerry Adams to sue the British taxpayer? How is that supporting those who served their country valiantly on Operation Banner?

Al Carns: Let us be absolutely clear: the right hon. Gentleman is looking at an individual who served his country on Operation Banner, so I understand the issues for all our veterans and I have been working very hard with the Northern Ireland Office to make sure that veterans' welfare and legal services are provided, so that anyone involved in any of the investigations gets the support they require and that we can minimise the impact on what is quite a unique group of elderly veterans.

Defence of Undersea Infrastructure

4. **Nick Timothy** (West Suffolk) (Con): What steps he is taking to strengthen the UK's defences against threats to undersea infrastructure. [903343]

7. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What steps he is taking to strengthen the UK's defences against threats to undersea infrastructure. [903346]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Luke Pollard): We are committed to maintaining and enhancing the security and resilience of critical undersea infrastructure. Just as the Defence Secretary called out the activities of the Russian spy ship Yantar hovering over our undersea cables, let those who threaten the UK or our allies be in no doubt that we will defend our undersea infrastructure. This is one area that the strategic defence review is looking at in order to enhance our homeland security.

Nick Timothy: In January, I asked the Defence Secretary which single Minister is responsible for the security of offshore infrastructure. We know that Russia and China target interconnectors and undersea cables, we know that Russia places listening devices on our wind turbines to monitor submarines, and we know that China controls the tech in the turbines that the Energy Secretary wants to buy. The Defence Secretary could not answer me in January, and neither did the Prime Minister when I asked him earlier this month. When are we going to find out who is actually in charge?

Luke Pollard: There is no doubt in my mind that the Prime Minister is responsible for the security of this nation, and he delegates different areas to different Departments. That is a completely normal way of dealing with our national security. Let us be absolutely clear: within Defence, we take this seriously and we work with colleagues across Departments to make sure that we are not only securing our infrastructure from a defence perspective, but using our trade routes to make sure that we are protecting and buying the right technology and using our planning system to make sure that, where there is development, it does not impinge on our national security.

Bob Blackman: The Minister will be well aware that 99% of internet traffic is carried on undersea cables. Clearly the Russians and other enemies would seek to disrupt that, so will the Minister look at utilising autonomous minesweepers that could be deployed to protect our undersea cables? In particular, will he commit to looking at introducing them in the Black sea, if there is a truce between Russia and Ukraine, so that those cables are protected as well? That is part of the NATO infrastructure.

Luke Pollard: The hon. Gentleman is right that subsea fibre-optic cables carry about 99% of our data—many people believe it is satellites, but it is cables. As a country we are investing in new technologies and I expect that, as we get further towards the time when the defence review is published, he will see the ambition we have as a Government to invest more in autonomous systems, not only to support undersea cable protection, but to deal with the threat of Russian submarines and other capability, and other threats to our nations. We will ensure that we invest in our defence capabilities and in supporting those people who serve as well.

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

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): With escalating threats to our critical infrastructure, I was concerned by reports over the weekend that our armed forces chiefs are apparently being gagged over the upcoming strategic defence review, which has been described by some as "limp". I am fully aware that, recognising the dangers,

the Government have announced the largest increase in defence spending since the end of the second world war, but at this critical time we certainly should not be sidelining our service chiefs or penny-pinching on our nation's defence. Would the Minister like to take this opportunity to reassure the nation that our strategic defence review, when published, will be bold, ambitious and anything but limp?

Luke Pollard: Absolutely. We live in incredibly difficult times, which is why this Government are meeting the moment with increased defence spending and the biggest reform of our defence in 50 years. We are investing in new technologies, and investing in the people who keep our country safe. From the most senior generals and admirals down to privates and sailors, we are giving all our armed forces a renewed determination to make sure they understand how we defend our country in its best interests, but also that the nation backs them in defending our country. There are further announcements to come, but let us all be in no doubt but that the whole House backs our armed forces and that we look forward to the further investment in defence that is coming.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I welcome the UK's leadership on this issue. The proposed AQUIND interconnector raises serious concerns about the security of UK undersea infrastructure, particularly given the significant political donations made by its owners to various Conservative politicians. Further to the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), will the Minister confirm that protecting domestic security will be a central focus of the SDR?

Luke Pollard: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. I recently met a cross-party delegation, including the Labour MPs for Portsmouth—my hon. Friends the Members for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) and for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan)—and the Conservative MP for Fareham, the right hon. and learned Member for Fareham and Waterlooville (Sueella Braverman), to talk about the AQUIND interconnector. It is part of a planning decision being taken by the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, so it is difficult for me to comment on, but let me be absolutely clear that we take defending our underwater infrastructure very seriously, and we will continue to make decisions that support its defence.

Sexual Harassment

6. **Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): What steps he is taking to protect female members of the armed forces from sexual harassment. [903345]

The Minister for Veterans and People (Al Carns): Over the last 24 years, I have had the absolute privilege of working with amazing servicewomen across the armed forces, and also with women in the police, the NHS and, of course, our intelligence service. There is no place for unacceptable behaviours in defence—absolutely no place at all—and the women who choose to serve deserve better.

This Government are taking action. Just last week, I announced the launch of the long called for tri-service complaints unit, which will sit outside the chain of command. The single services will therefore not be

able to, nor be perceived to be able to, mark their own homework. I am working across Government, in particular with the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), and the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), on setting up a defence violence against women and girls taskforce. Just two weeks ago, I met the Women's Network, and I have also sat on the Raising our Standards panel of those from across trade and other organisations, the purpose of which is to really criticise us and pull forward any lessons learned from broader society.

Sarah Dyke: I thank the Minister for his response, and for the work he has done. The 2024 armed forces continuous attitude survey reported that 13% of female personnel had experienced sexual harassment in service during the prior 12 months, and many women have said they would not report an incident due to fear of the consequences. The recently announced tri-service scheme is welcome, but what steps is he taking to make it genuinely independent to ensure women's confidence in the scheme and their safety while serving in the armed forces?

Al Carns: There are two principal elements. The tri-service complaints system sits outside the chain of command, and when certain issues hit a threshold, they will be taken away from the single services, so the system will be completely independent. The second is the violence against women and girls taskforce that we have created, which will work directly to me. It will be a small team at my level, but it will have tentacles right down into the single services. It will provide a safe space for women to go to if they want to raise an issue or a complaint, which can then be transferred into the complaints system or, indeed, in parallel all the way up to me so that I can take action directly.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): I thank the Minister, and I welcome the measures announced last week. My constituents in Monmouthshire and people across Wales would be interested to hear more from the Minister about the new violence against women and girls taskforce, and the regional and national champions. How will they ensure that everyone who serves in the armed forces can do so in safety?

Al Carns: I refer my hon. Friend to my answer to the last question. The violence against women and girls taskforce is taking best practice from the rest of Government and ensuring that it is replicated in defence, but it is actually going one step further and putting a structure in place. As I always say, I was very young when I joined the Marines, and I was caught up in this hierarchical situation. Where do you go to make a complaint? You don't actually have anywhere to go to make a complaint. The taskforce will provide a safe space, so that if people want to pop out of the chain of command to highlight a concern, it can be elevated quickly and dealt with rapidly.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I welcome the creation of the violence against women and girls taskforce, which is an important step towards enabling complaints to be heard and addressed outside the chain

of command, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) for raising this important issue. Like the taskforce, the Government have committed to a new veterans strategy focusing specifically on the experience of women who have left the service. Will the Minister outline the timescale for the development and implementation of that strategy, given how vital it is that women come and serve in the armed forces, and that they feel safe and secure in doing so?

Al Carns: As part of our future veterans strategy, a women veterans annexe will provide specific guidance on females wanting to leave the armed forces. It is also important to mention that we are not just setting up the violence against women and girls taskforce; we have the sexual harassment survey going out, the tri-service complaints system, the review of our zero-tolerance policy by a KC to move to 100% action, an international culture and behaviours conference to learn best lessons from our international partners, and the modernisation of our military appraisal system to ensure that people who get involved in unacceptable behaviour are tracked through the system so they can be held to account.

NATO Defence Industrial Capacity

8. **Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst** (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): What discussions he has had with his NATO counterparts on increasing defence industrial capacity across the alliance. [903347]

The Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry (Maria Eagle): The Defence Secretary raised this issue at the meeting of all NATO Defence Ministers in February and has held a number of discussions with NATO allies since, including with the US Secretary of Defence and in meetings with joint expeditionary force and E5 allies. European allies are stepping up within NATO, and the UK is leading efforts to increase defence spending and expand defence industrial capacity.

Dr Shastri-Hurst: I concur with my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) that it is deeply disappointing that France has blocked European Union countries from allowing SAFE—Security Action for Europe—funds to be used for the procurement of British weapons. With that in mind, what has the Minister done to ensure that actions are being taken to guarantee a multilateral, NATO-wide procurement strategy, with the UK at its centre?

Maria Eagle: I have met a number of my equivalents bilaterally, but it is important to say that we welcome the ReArm initiative and that it is in all our interests for SAFE to allow member states to partner with the UK. We will continue to emphasise the need for EU defence financing and wider defence industrial initiatives to include third countries like the UK. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said in answer to an earlier question, we want to conclude a UK-EU defence and security pact that will give us access to that scheme.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her response. Last week, the Defence Committee met the Chief of the General Staff, who highlighted the challenges of supporting our troops in Estonia. I highlighted the Rail Baltica project, which received significant funding from the EU's Connecting Europe Facility and NATO, and which

links my constituency, via High Speed 1, right through to the Baltics using British steel. Will the Minister meet me to discuss supporting the expansion of HS1 capacity, as it is the type of opportunity that would support growth within our defence industrial capacity, improve our deterrence and increase our commitment to our European allies, while bringing high quality jobs to east London?

Maria Eagle: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. As I hope hon. Members from around the House are starting to realise, if I am asked for a meeting my general answer is yes. I am very happy to meet him.

Armed Forces Recruitment

9. **Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase recruitment to the armed forces. [903348]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Luke Pollard): We inherited a broken recruitment system from the Conservatives. We promised to take steps to fix it and we are: the largest pay increase in 20 years for those who serve; a 35% pay increase for recruits; the scrapping of over 100 outdated medical practices; the creation of a new direct entry cyber-pathway; a conditional offer within 10 days of applying; a training start date within 30 days; and the announcement of a new tri-service recruitment scheme to attract the very best to our armed forces.

Jim Dickson: I thank the Minister for his response. My constituency has a proud military history. Given the need to expand our armed forces, how can we help a new generation of young people in Dartford to access highly skilled and rewarding careers across all the armed forces?

Luke Pollard: Not only is a career in our armed forces good for a young person; it also offers training opportunities, with each of our single services appearing in the top five apprentice employers—the very best in our country. A career in the defence industry is also good for our young people. The ability to move between regular, reserve and industry more frequently and more easily not only secures the national defence of our country and provides more opportunities for our young people, but means that defence can be an even better and bigger engine for growth. Those are the proposals we will be coming forward with in due course.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): In recent years, for every 100 servicemen recruited, 130 have left. That is completely unsustainable. What is the Minister doing to ensure that we retain more troops, with not only the package within our armed forces, but competitive packages in the private sector?

Luke Pollard: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right about the terrible state of armed forces retention that we inherited. We have seen armed forces morale drop from 60% in 2010 to just 40% last July. We need to invest more in our armed forces, which is why we have introduced the biggest pay rise in 20 years and why we are bringing defence housing back under public control, so that it can be invested in. It is also why we are

creating the Armed Forces Commissioner, who will provide an independent champion for service welfare matters for those who serve. We do need to invest more, which is why my ministerial colleagues and I have created an armed forces recruitment and retention board within the MOD to focus efforts on improving service life for all those who serve and their families.

Domestic Abuse: Defence Personnel

10. Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): What steps he is taking to support defence personnel affected by domestic abuse. [903349]

The Minister for Veterans and People (Al Carns): As I mentioned earlier, we are moving forward with our women and girls taskforce to drive progress on the Government's commitment to halve violence against women and girls in a decade. Last year, we launched the Ministry of Defence's domestic abuse action plan and trained more than 700 service police in specialist domestic abuse and coercive control training, and now everybody in the military—every man and woman across the armed forces—goes through unacceptable sexual behaviour training.

Josh Babarinde: According to King's College London, one in 10 of our armed forces personnel is a survivor of domestic abuse, but, because there is no specific offence of domestic abuse in the law, the Ministry of Justice has confirmed that it cannot comprehensively identify perpetrators, and cannot therefore comprehensively rehabilitate them and keep victims and survivors safe. Will the Minister join me and colleagues across the House in campaigning for a specific offence of domestic abuse in the law so that we can better protect our armed forces personnel from domestic abuse?

Al Carns: It is completely clear to me that any sort of domestic abuse in any way, shape or form in the armed forces is completely unacceptable. If we can help to address and track some of that through the armed forces, it will make it far easier to deal with and ensure rehabilitation. I will take this conversation on after these questions.

US Cyber-operations against Russia

11. Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): If he will make an assessment of the potential impact of the pause in offensive cyber-operations against Russia by the US on security in Europe. [903350]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Luke Pollard): UK defence networks face a range of state threats from malign actors. In 2024, the National Cyber Security Centre received 1,957 reports of cyber-attacks, of which 89 were nationally significant, with 12 severe in nature. The Government continue to improve resilience and response options to those threats.

Dr Pinkerton: As part of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, together with colleagues, I recently visited the 77th Brigade and learned more about the amazing work the men and women of the brigade are doing to tackle Russian disinformation in eastern Europe and elsewhere. The trip came just a few days after the

United States President announced his decision to cease American offensive cyber-operations against Russia over disinformation altogether, which has led to growing concerns that willing countries do not have the capacity or ability to tackle that particular threat. Will the Minister tell us what assessment has been made of the capabilities that we have in the United Kingdom to tackle that threat, and does he agree that it places greater pressure on the 77th Brigade and other agencies?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. The 77th Brigade does a superb job of tackling disinformation, especially by malign actors. We need to expand our provision and range of capabilities, which is precisely why we have created a new direct entry cyber-pathway to recruit people directly into our cyber-forces to support our national resilience in both defensive and offensive operations. The hon. Gentleman will understand that I cannot talk about ongoing operations, but I can say that we are investing more in this area to keep ourselves and our allies safe.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): With GCHQ, the UK's cyber-operations are genuinely world-leading. What assurance can the Minister give the House that we will continue to support Ukraine with our cyber-security?

Luke Pollard: We have made it very clear that we will continue supporting Ukraine, not only to put it in the best possible position on the battlefield and in any negotiations to come, but to secure its critical national infrastructure. We will continue working with Ukraine's defence and civilian sectors, which are incredibly impressive in this area, to make sure that it has the technology, training and access to support to keep its country safe.

EU Defence and Security Agreement

12. Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): If he will make it his policy to negotiate a defence and security agreement with the EU. [903351]

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey): When the British public elected us as the new Government, we said that Labour will seek an ambitious new UK-EU security pact to strengthen co-operation on the threats that we face and will rebuild relationships with key European allies. With NATO as the cornerstone of our security in Europe, that is exactly what we are doing.

Dr Savage: I thank the Secretary of State for his response. Given President Trump's increasing unpredictability and shifting policies, can the Secretary of State share how the Government are strengthening defence procurement agreements with European partners to enhance our capabilities and reduce our reliance on the United States?

John Healey: When I spoke last week with High Representative Kallas and Commissioner Kubilius, that was exactly what I discussed: closer defence collaboration that will see a stronger European effort, with the UK and the EU, but within the NATO framework, which is the cornerstone for all of us to keep ourselves safe.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): My constituents have steadfastly supported the people of Ukraine since Russia's illegal invasion. Can the Secretary of State

confirm that collective support for Ukraine will be a major focus of his discussions with EU counterparts and that under this Government the UK will always lead the way in stepping up support for Ukraine?

John Healey: Indeed, I can. My hon. Friend makes an important point. This period is critical for Ukraine and for European security. I hope that he sees a UK Government who are stepping up to provide stronger support for Ukraine, co-ordinating allies to do more, stepping up on European security, and above all stepping up on defence spending.

Mr Speaker: I call Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): We support the Government's commitment to strengthening defence ties with our European partners, but they need to go further and faster to ensure that the UK does not get left behind. Has the Defence Secretary spoken with his counterparts in the EU about the value of the new stand-alone UK-EU defence pact, which will enable the UK to better influence decisions around new finance programmes, such as a rearmament bank to support defence investment across Europe?

John Healey: Yes. Last week I met with High Representative Kallas and spoke with Commissioner Kubilius, and that was exactly the subject of our conversations.

Joint Expeditionary Force

13. **Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): What discussions he has had with his European counterparts on the joint expeditionary force. [903352]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Luke Pollard): The UK is fully committed to the joint expeditionary force. I discussed the JEF on my visits to Denmark, Latvia, Finland, Lithuania and the Netherlands last month. I meet regularly with the JEF partners' defence attachés, including last week.

Jamie Stone: I thank the Minister for his answer. Clearly we have a particularly good relationship with the countries that make up the joint expeditionary force. The Minister and I have completed the armed forces parliamentary scheme and were both plunged into the snowdrifts in Norway at Bardufoss. Some of the kit that the Norwegians had was particularly impressive, as I am sure the Minister would agree. Could I press him on what work we can do with the countries in the joint expeditionary force on procurement, design and perhaps development of equipment?

Luke Pollard: Just to clarify for the House, they were different snowdrifts at different times—otherwise there could be stories! The more procurement we can do with our allies, the better—not only in how interoperable the equipment will be but in its interchangeability. With P-8s, F-35s and potentially Type 26 frigates being shared by common nations in the High North, there is a huge opportunity to work together more closely, creating more jobs and more effective deterrents against Russian aggression.

Cadets: Career Preparation

14. **Mark Garnier** (Wyre Forest) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help prepare cadets for potential careers in the armed forces. [903353]

The Minister for Veterans and People (Al Carns): I have visited multiple cadet units all over the country and have been truly astounded at the social mobility that the cadets provides for a whole range of young people. We have over 140,000 cadets at the moment, supported by 26,000 volunteers. We are doing everything we can to look to expand those programmes over time and ensure that the opportunity is available for everybody, from every walk of life.

Mark Garnier: In my new role as the chair of the British Shooting Sports Council, I take a keen interest in cadet target rifle shooting. The Minister will be aware that the Ministry of Defence is proposing to withdraw from service the 7.62 cadet target rifle from 2026, and the .22 rifle just two years later. Aside from depriving cadets from the opportunity to learn the highly disciplined and valuable skills of firearms safety and use, the proposal calls into question the future of target rifle shooting in the UK. Will the Minister meet me and representatives of the shooting and target rifle community to discuss opportunities to reverse this decision?

Al Carns: I will happily come and talk through that in due course. I have been in the military for 24 years and have spent a lot of time shooting, and I can see its benefits.

Defence Procurement: SMEs

15. **Amanda Martin** (Portsmouth North) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure small and medium enterprises are able to participate in defence procurement contracts. [903354]

The Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry (Maria Eagle): SMEs can help us make defence an engine for growth in all our nations and regions. I want far more involvement from SMEs in our procurement, providing agility, innovation and resilience as we seek to ramp up our industrial production. That is why the Prime Minister recently launched a new defence SME support hub, and committed us to publishing a new target for MOD spend with SMEs.

Amanda Martin: Last week, as part of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, I had the privilege of visiting His Majesty's Royal Naval Base in Portsmouth, to meet personnel and see equipment used by our armed forces that is made by Accuracy International and SIG Sauer, an SME firearms manufacturer in my constituency. Accuracy International employs more than 100 local people. What is the Minister doing to ensure that companies such as Accuracy International and SIG Sauer are given a fair shot in defence procurement and can continue to provide jobs in my city?

Maria Eagle: A fair shot—I commend my hon. Friend on her puns. Accuracy International has made a great contribution to UK defence and exports. I have been talking to defence firms, many of which are SMEs,

during the defence industrial strategy consultation. I hope that the changes that we will make to speed up procurement and provide more access to opportunities will transform their chances of doing business with us, while making defence an engine for growth across all our nations and regions.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): We are shortly to appoint a national armaments director with a salary of more than £600,000 a year. I hope that that colossal salary comes with the mandate to be able to tear up the book on defence procurement as we rearm the nation. Will the Minister reassure me that when we get the national armaments director back to the Defence Committee in a year's time, they will not say, "Well, we tried to change things, but they wouldn't let me"?

Maria Eagle: I assure the hon. Gentleman that we are tearing up the way in which procurement works before the national armaments director moves into his place. It is one of the biggest jobs in government, which needs the right salary to attract the right person. I am clear that we will do things differently. The national armaments director will be held accountable for ensuring that we do so.

Topical Questions

T1. [903364] **Gurinder Singh Josan** (Smethwick) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey): A lot has happened since the last defence oral questions six weeks ago. The Prime Minister announced the largest sustained increase in defence spending since the end of the cold war, hitting 2.5% of GDP by 2027 and 3% in the next Parliament. I chaired the Ukraine defence contact group of nearly 50 countries—the first European Defence Minister to do so—which secured an extra €1.5 billion of military support for Ukraine. With France, the UK is leading plans to put together a coalition of the willing to secure a peace deal in Ukraine; 31 nations joined a planning meeting last week at the permanent joint headquarters, and there are further meetings there this week as we accelerate that planning. This is a Government stepping up on European security, on Ukraine, on defence spending and in all areas. This is UK leadership in action.

Gurinder Singh Josan: The Government's commitment to use defence procurement to strengthen our industrial sector is welcome. Will the Secretary of State please outline how the Government are supporting local manufacturers across the UK and ensuring that defence contracts contribute to long-term industrial growth and job creation? In particular, how are they encouraging and supporting companies such as Pargat Housewares in my constituency, which is a private, ethnic minority-owned business and one of the UK's largest producers of pots, pans and bakeware using advanced and extremely energy-efficient techniques?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is right that SMEs are often the drivers of productivity and innovation. We recently announced that we will be setting targets for an increasing share of defence contracts to go to SMEs, alongside the formation of a new defence innovation office.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): If our forces go to Ukraine, it will be as part of a peacekeeping mission, but, as the Veterans Minister reminded us earlier, Operation Banner was also described as peacekeeping, yet decades later those who served are being hounded in our courts. Our soldiers in Iraq were subjected to hundreds of vexatious claims. If our forces go to Ukraine, will the Secretary of State consider a derogation from the European convention on human rights so as to maximise our protection against possible lawfare?

John Healey: If we go into Ukraine, we will be going into a negotiated peace, not a shooting war. Our aim is to secure borders, to ensure safe skies and to ensure safe seas. Is the hon. Gentleman saying that he will not support a UK mission and UK troops without that derogation?

James Cartlidge: Of course not. The Secretary of State knows perfectly well that the Labour Government derogated from the ECHR after 9/11, and a country in Europe has derogated from the ECHR since 2015. That country is Ukraine, and that is because there is a war on. Surely he recognises that, even if it is a peacekeeping force, there will still be threats, and Russian nationals have been particularly adept at lawfare in our own courts. Surely he will at least consider giving the maximum protection to our armed forces from vexatious claims by derogating from the ECHR if there is a deployment.

John Healey: Our armed forces will always have our fullest support. Just to be clear to the hon. Gentleman, we, alongside France, are putting together a coalition of the willing, responding to the challenge from the US for Europe to step up on Ukraine. We are responding to the requirement from Ukraine for security arrangements that will give it the conviction and confidence that any negotiated peace will last. That is a worthy mission, and it is one that the UK is leading. I hope that it has the support of both sides of the House.

T2. [903365] **Steve Yemm** (Mansfield) (Lab): Our troops must be able to trust the body armour that they wear to keep them safe. Will the Minister for the Armed Forces update the House on how withdrawing cracked enhanced combat body armour is going and on when everyone in our forces can expect to know that their body armour is safe?

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Luke Pollard): I fully agree with my hon. Friend and, on something as fundamental as body armour, we back our troops. I ordered immediate action to replace ECBA on the frontline, flying new body armour to units worldwide. Rapid testing of plates is under way. Our people should know that their safety matters to the Government, and we will act to keep them safe.

T3. [903366] **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Last week, it was announced that the SNP Government are sending more shipbuilding contracts abroad. Seven CalMac ferries that could be constructed on the Clyde will instead be built in Poland. Will the Minister share how many warships the United Kingdom Government are currently building in Scotland?

The Minister for Defence Procurement and Industry (Maria Eagle): As the hon. Gentleman will probably know, Type 31s are being built at Rosyth and Type 26s are being built at Govan. We have got a programme for eight at Govan, and five so far at Rosyth—that is the current number.

Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Ind): As you know all too well, Mr Speaker, Lancashire has a proud defence manufacturing pedigree at the cutting edge of our British sovereign capability—you think manufacturing and you think Lancashire. Will the Minister for Defence Procurement continue to champion Lancashire's defence jobs? Will she commit—I understand that this is cheeky—to replacing tranche 1 Typhoon aircraft with new, modern Lancashire-made Typhoons?

Maria Eagle: I commend my hon. Friend for asking that question. He will know that the strategic defence review is considering our current mix of fourth and fifth-generation aircraft. He will also know that, in addition to the Typhoon, 15% of the F-35s as well as 37% of the Typhoons are made in Lancashire, so there is work aplenty in Lancashire, no matter which aeroplane is bought.

T4. [903368] **Zöe Franklin (Guildford) (LD):** My constituent Sam serves in Afghanistan and suffers from PTSD. Although he is entitled to compensation, his condition has left him struggling with the forms and, 10 years on, he has been told that he can have only £600, when he is entitled to thousands. Can the Minister explain what steps are being taken to ensure that those who give so much serving our country are helped to access the financial assistance they are entitled to, and not blocked by bureaucracy?

The Minister for Veterans and People (Al Carns): That is a really valid question. We pay out more than £1.5 billion a year in compensation through the armed forces compensation scheme and the war pension scheme. If the hon. Member wants to write to me on that specific case, I can have a look into it. I also refer her to Op Courage, which is linked to mental health and has had 34,000 referrals to date.

James Asser (West Ham and Beckton) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that expanding our military expenditure creates a golden opportunity to deal with the shortage of people going into science, technology and engineering jobs, and that as we expand the military budget, we should make sure that the defence industry expands the number of apprenticeships and builds a robust skills and training base so that young people can benefit from those jobs?

Maria Eagle: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. Of course, there are skills shortages across much of manufacturing, not only in defence, so there is certainly going to be an issue. I can tell him that the apprentices I have met in the defence industry tend to smile the whole time. They are getting extremely good training for lifelong excellent jobs, so I am absolutely certain that we can get that across to young people and ensure that defence gets its fair share of the skilled people that we need.

T5. [903369] **Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD):** With the UK frozen out of the EU rearmament scheme while defence contractors and security firms in Albania,

Norway and South Korea stand to benefit, what estimates has the Secretary of State made of the potential loss of economic activity in the UK as a result?

John Healey: The strongest argument for saying that there needs to be UK collaboration and co-operation with the EU and across Europe is that some of our best capabilities, from the Typhoon and the Meteor to Storm Shadow, have been developed through multinational efforts including the UK. It is that sort of collaboration that we want to secure for the future, and the EU White Paper gives us a basis for starting to negotiate that.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): We are incredibly proud of our veterans in Peterborough. Will the Minister join me in recognising the work of Councillor Jason McNally, our armed forces champion, and his predecessor, Councillor John Fox, and tell us what more the Government can do to help them to support more people signing up to the armed forces covenant?

Al Carns: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting two amazing individuals who I imagine are putting a huge number of hours into supporting the veterans community and the armed forces community. The covenant will come into law in 2026, and when it does, we need to ensure that those armed forces champions understand what it provides at local level and can harness its benefits for the whole of the armed forces.

T6. [903370] **John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con):** The Hawk aircraft, most famous in the scarlet livery of the Red Arrows, is at the end of its service life. Can Ministers explain what steps they are taking to ensure that we replace it with a British-built sovereign capability?

Maria Eagle: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that Hawk is due to be out of service in the early 2030s. We are taking steps to consider what the alternatives might be, and we of will course consider any UK options that exist. I cannot tell him what the answer to that is yet, but it is under active consideration.

Claire Hazelgrove (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Lab): Those who bravely serve in our forces should never lose their say in our country's future, so I welcome the Government's swift action to introduce the ability to use the veterans ID card as voter ID. May I ask the Minister what plans there are to ensure that veterans around the country are aware of this important change?

Al Carns: The veterans ID card is a fantastic initiative that has now been rolled out for most veterans. We have thousands of applications a week and will continue to endeavour to ensure that they get delivered in the most timely and effective manner. Anybody who is interested in veterans' welfare issues or the services available should go to the gov.uk website and type in "veterans support", and there will be a plethora of different avenues for them to unlock.

T7. [903371] **George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con):** Mid Norfolk is a proud rural and military constituency with many employees working at RAF Marham and Swanton Morley barracks, which is home to the Queen's Dragoon Guards and many cadets and veterans. A few

years ago, we managed to secure the extension of Swanton Morley barracks, which had been scheduled for closure. Does the welcome defence surge mean that its closure, slated for 2031, might be reviewed?

Maria Eagle: I cannot give the hon. Gentleman an answer right now, but I am certainly happy to look into it and meet him, if he wants a meeting, or write to him.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I have a number of nuclear veterans in my Na h-Eileanan an Iar constituency, as many colleagues do in their constituencies. What steps are Ministers taking to meet veterans, acknowledge their service and deal with the consequences of their service and their exposure to nuclear material?

Al Carns: I have met nuclear test veterans from two of the main charities, and I will continue to do so regularly to ensure that there is continuity of engagement. We have promised to do two things. One is a full and thorough review of the records—not a stovepiped look, but a whole review. That will take a bit of time, but we will do that in a thorough manner. The second is consistent engagement to ensure that people are informed of our progress.

T8. [903372] **Sir Ashley Fox** (Bridgwater) (Con): President Macron has blocked British firms from the new EU defence fund. What are the Secretary of State's views on this act of solidarity?

John Healey: That is just not accurate. There is a new proposal for a strategy from the European Union, and it has opportunities for third countries such as the UK to participate. Our discussions demonstrate the importance of the UK being able to collaborate industrially and as a Government to meet the threats we face.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that when we discuss procurement and British-made weapons, we also need to consider our responsibilities and legal duties in relation to the issuing of arms licences? Does he agree that now is the time to talk about ending all arms sales to Israel?

John Healey: We keep all our arms exports constantly under review. We have made decisions on a limited number of exports in relation to Israel. That position of keeping things under review continues, but we have no plans at this stage to make any change.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): Staff Sergeant Peter Cluff died in February 2016, with an in-service designation to that death. His widow, Kirsty, and his children, Meredith and Heather, were in the benefit of the armed forces pension scheme and remain so. However, the scheme made a miscalculation and have sent debt collectors to them to try to recover a fairly small sum. I asked about the matter three months ago and have not had a response from the Department. Will the Secretary of State or one of his Ministers meet me to discuss this unedifying advert for the Ministry of Defence?

Al Carns: That is a truly harrowing story. I will absolutely take that on, and we will meet straight after this and get it solved.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): The recent report “A Dark Shadow” shone a light on the link between sexual assault and suicidal ideation in the military community. I was therefore pleased to see the announcement from the MOD last week about the removal of sexual harassment investigations from the chain of command—something for which campaigners and survivors have campaigned for such a long time. They are also keen to have reassurance, however. Will the Minister confirm that this is not a continuation of the previous Government's failed efforts, but a step change in making the process truly independent?

Al Carns: This absolutely is a step change. A tri-service complaints system, removed from the single services, has been called for for a long time. We have taken decisive action to do that, and it will move things in the right direction. Combine that with the violence against women and girls taskforce, and we are double-tapping to ensure that we have the best support for women and, indeed, anyone else in the armed forces.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Concerns have been growing over China's aggression in the Indo-Pacific region. Given the strategic importance of the Taiwan strait to global security, what has been the Department's response to those rising tensions?

Luke Pollard: We are certainly of the view that any difficulties in the Taiwan strait should be resolved diplomatically, without the use of force or coercion. The United Kingdom will deploy our carrier strike group to the Indo-Pacific later this year as a projection of our responsibility to the region and to make it clear that difficulties are best resolved diplomatically.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): On Friday I was pleased to join colleagues from across the House to hear the Royal Marines band service in concert as part of the Mountbatten festival of music. May I invite the Government to reaffirm their commitment to the Royal Marines band service? It makes a huge contribution to defence diplomacy and combat operations.

Al Carns: That is a great question. The Royal Marine band service is the best band service in our armed forces, and it is absolutely safe under our watch. It provides a fantastic influence opportunity, as well as essential military services outside the musical profession.

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): The Defence Secretary should know that the whole House supports the Government's actions to preserve peace in Ukraine, but that was not the point that the shadow Secretary of State was making. He was asking whether the Ministry of Defence recognises that it has a duty of care towards soldiers who fight for their country and then face decades of lawfare and the misuse of the European convention on human rights. Will the Ministry do something to protect those soldiers?

John Healey: I say to the right hon. Gentleman that we are totally committed to our duty of care and to standing by our forces. We also recognise that the previous Government put in place legislation—the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Act 2021—to deal with any concerns in this place.

Dr Beccy Cooper (Worthing West) (Lab): Drug-resistant infections have been rising in Ukraine and remain a challenge in treating wounded soldiers and getting them back to the frontline. Such infections have also spread outside Ukraine and into Europe. In the context of conflict, what steps are the Minister and the Department taking to ensure that antimicrobial resistance is appropriately considered in the national security strategy?

Luke Pollard: It is important that we meet the threats we face, which are not just from state actors but relate to a range of issues. I would be very happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss her interest in this topic further.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): This afternoon I was contacted by the father of Theodore, who lives in Grayshott in my constituency. Theodore wants to go to the Army Foundation College in Harrogate in September, but Capita has not sent the request for his medical record to his local surgery. Will the Minister look in general at how Capita is performing, and will he ensure in particular that Theodore can attend the foundation college in September?

Luke Pollard: I commend Theodore for his interest in attending Harrogate. If the hon. Gentleman writes to me, I will happily look into it. As he will know, Capita is not continuing the Army recruitment work. It is being replaced by a new tri-service offer that will come online in 2027.

Disruption at Heathrow

3.43 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander):

With permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement regarding the power outage, caused by a substation fire, that impacted on Heathrow airport operations on Friday 21 March.

I begin by acknowledging the disruption to everyone affected by this incident. Many homes, schools and businesses temporarily lost power, some families have had to evacuate their homes, and many thousands have had their travel plans impacted. I thank the firefighters and emergency responders who worked in difficult conditions to put the fire out, as well as Heathrow, the National Grid and all the other public services involved for working so hard to get power back on and people back travelling again. This was an unprecedented event, and we must learn any and all lessons we can to ensure that it does not recur.

Let me begin by setting out what we currently know about the cause of the incident. A large fire broke out at North Hyde substation at 11.30 pm on Thursday 20 March, and was brought under control the following day. Due to the impacts, Heathrow airport announced at 4.30 am on Friday that it would close until midnight that day. Power was restored to domestic customers in a matter of hours, after the operator of the local distribution network, Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks, redistributed power through other parts of the network.

By comparison, Heathrow is one of the country's biggest consumers of electricity and requires as much power as a small city. What we know is that there was an unprecedented outage, and that it was not the result of a single point of failure on the electricity transmission or distribution system. The feed from North Hyde substation is one of three supply points to Heathrow, and the fire caused exceptional damage that took the whole substation out of service. The other supply points continued supplying to Heathrow airport throughout the incident.

Heathrow's view was that that supply was insufficient to ensure the safe and secure ongoing operation of all systems across the whole airport. It proceeded to reconfigure its internal electricity network to enable the resumption of full operations, utilising the other two external supply points. That required hundreds of systems to be safely powered down, and then safely powered up, with extensive testing. The airport has a range of back-up generators and uninterruptible power supplies, including diesel generators, to provide power to essential systems to enable them safely to land planes. Those back-up systems ensured that safety and security systems and protocols were maintained at all times, but they were never designed to support full operation of the whole airport.

By 2.30 on Friday afternoon, Heathrow began restarting systems to ensure that they were safely operating. By 4 pm, the airport was 100% confident that all systems were safely operating across the whole network, and announced that some flights would be able to restart that day. The first flights, from about 6 pm, were so-called positioning flights, which were to get aircraft and crew to the right places to resume normal operations the following day. That was followed by flights diverted to UK and non-UK airports, to allow passengers to be repatriated, and a small number of outbound long-haul flights. Since Saturday,

Heathrow has been fully operational, with more than 250,000 passengers able to fly to and from the airport on Saturday. Due to knock-on impacts of the event, there continued to be some delays and cancellations over the weekend.

Overall, the impact of Heathrow's closure led to over 1,300 flights and more than 200,000 passengers having their flights cancelled or diverted on Friday, and a further 110 cancelled on Saturday. The Government are acutely aware of the need to ensure that passengers are well looked after and their consumer rights protected. This is why UK law ensures that airlines must provide passengers with a refund within seven days, or passengers must be rerouted to their destination under the same conditions. We are closely monitoring to ensure that passengers are properly supported. To support the recovery, my Department temporarily lifted restrictions on overnight flights, to ease congestion. Heathrow and airlines also added extra capacity into the system to help affected passengers. We allowed rail tickets to be used flexibly to help passengers who were not able to use their original tickets.

Regarding the cause of the fire, the Metropolitan police confirmed that the fire is not believed to be suspicious. However, due to the location of the substation and the impact that this incident has had on critical national infrastructure, the Met's counter terrorism command is leading our inquiries into this matter. This is due to the specialist resources and capabilities within that command, which can assist in progressing the investigation at pace to help minimise disruption and identify the cause. It would not be appropriate to comment further while these investigations continue, but we will of course update the House once it is appropriate to do so.

Although it is positive that electricity supplies were restored quickly, there will be learnings to ensure that we avoid such incidents reoccurring. That is why on Saturday, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, working with Ofgem, commissioned the independent National Energy System Operator to urgently investigate the incident. The review will also seek to understand any wider lessons to be learned for energy resilience for critical national infrastructure. NESO has been asked to report back to the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero with initial findings within six weeks.

In addition, Heathrow has asked Ruth Kelly, a former Secretary of State for Transport and an independent member of Heathrow's board, to undertake a review of its internal resilience. The Kelly review will analyse the robustness and execution of Heathrow's crisis management plans, the airport's response, and how it recovered the operation.

Colleagues across the House will appreciate that we do not yet know everything there is to know about the incident, but I will try to answer questions from hon. Members in as much detail as possible based on the latest information I have at my disposal.

I commend the statement to the House.

3.50 pm

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and for advance sight of it. I join her in extending my gratitude to the firefighters

[Gareth Bacon]

who responded so swiftly to the incident. I extend my sympathies to everybody affected by the disruption and place on record my thanks to all those at Heathrow who worked diligently to ensure that the airport came back on line over the weekend.

The loss of power in the Heathrow area caused significant disruption for thousands of travellers and countless businesses. Heathrow is one of the world's busiest airports and Europe's busiest air hub. It was scheduled to handle 1,351 flights, carrying up to 291,000 passengers on Friday. However, as we know, the fire at a nearby electrical substation forced planes to be diverted to other airports, with many long-haul flights returning to their points of departure. The financial cost of the shutdown to the airline industry is expected to total tens of millions of pounds, and there are significant question marks over the airport's possible vulnerability to further disruption in the future.

Before we discuss the specifics of the incident, I ask the Secretary of State to confirm that she will remain engaged with Heathrow, the airlines and other key stakeholders throughout this period to minimise the impact on passengers and the economy.

I note that the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, whom I am pleased to see in his place, has instructed NESO to investigate the incident urgently. It is crucial that NESO's investigation delivers a clear and objective assessment of the incident's circumstances and the UK's broader energy resilience. I ask the Government to keep the House informed as that investigation develops.

I also note that the Secretary of State for Transport will closely monitor Heathrow's internal investigation into the incident. She is right to do so. Although I trust that she will share any conclusions drawn from the report with the House, may I ask that she provides specific assurance today that she will indeed do so?

Let me focus on the details of the incident, which evidently raises significant concerns about the resilience of Heathrow airport and critical infrastructure in general. On Heathrow's resilience, important questions arise about why the airport was dependent on a single electrical substation, which proved so vulnerable to such an incident. I understand from media reports and from the Secretary of State's statement that although two additional substations are capable of powering the airport, doing so would require reconfiguring the power supply structure for all terminals. Does the Secretary of State believe that that set-up is appropriate for the country's largest airport? Additionally, what assessment has she made of the power supply resilience of other major UK airports?

With regard to the resilience of our critical national infrastructure, the episode underlines the urgent need to ensure that our critical infrastructure is safeguarded against both accidental incidents and deliberate acts of sabotage by malign actors. Hon. Members will recall that when President Putin launched his illegal invasion of Ukraine, global energy markets faced immense disruption, which posed the most significant threat to European energy security since the 1970s. Despite that upheaval, Britain's energy prices remained broadly stable, but only because the Government of the day took

decisive action to protect businesses and households from price spikes as far as possible. That came at a significant financial cost.

The event at Heathrow reminds us that true energy security depends not only on price stability but on the physical safety of our energy infrastructure. Given the crucial role of airports in our economy, we must remain vigilant. In the light of that, what discussions has the Secretary of State had with the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero about ensuring that the energy supply to major airports remains secure? What is the timeline for the Kelly review, and will its findings be made publicly available? Will the Secretary of State engage with colleagues across Government Departments to assess and mitigate the risks posed by malicious actors who will undoubtedly have taken note of this weekend's events? Finally, what specific steps will she take to strengthen the resilience of our critical national infrastructure?

Heidi Alexander: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the tone of his comments. I assure him and other Members of this House that I will do everything I can to keep them updated, and I will continue the engagement I have had with Heathrow since the incident first became known to me. I spoke to the chief executive of Heathrow on Friday morning and again today. If my officials can do anything to assist those on the Opposition Front Bench in understanding this very serious issue, I am willing to facilitate any such meetings that the hon. Gentleman wishes to have.

On the internal investigation that the London Heathrow board has commissioned Ruth Kelly to do, as the hon. Gentleman knows, I have asked to see a copy of that report. Assuming that I have the permission of Heathrow to share it more broadly, I am happy to share its contents with him and the House. On his question about whether I am content with and confident about the set-up for airport power supplies, I am not going to become an armchair electrical engineer; I want to see the report that has been commissioned by the airport and the report that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Energy has commissioned from NESO. We are also conducting a resilience review of critical national infrastructure via the Cabinet Office, and I assure the hon. Gentleman that we will look at any and all the issues that this incident raises in those reviews. I spoke with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Energy on Friday evening, and I assure the hon. Gentleman that I will continue to engage across Government on any of the issues that this incident raises.

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

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I thank the Transport Secretary for her statement. I also thank the fire services and the airport and airline staff who did so much over the weekend to address and support the situation and ensure that it did not get any worse. We will have a Committee session next week with the chief exec of Heathrow airport and others. We also look forward to asking the Secretary of State more questions when she comes to us after the Easter recess, by which time I hope that she and I will be better genned up on electrical engineering.

There has been talk this weekend about the single point of failure. In this case, that is about not just a particular electricity substation but what happens when our busiest airport closes. All our airports—critical national infrastructure—have an impact when they are at risk. I am told that the next airports national policy statement, like the last one, will cover only Heathrow. Is it not time that we had a national airports strategy to include what happens when any one of our airports is taken out of action?

Heidi Alexander: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, the Chair of the Transport Committee, for her remarks. The airports national policy statement is a site-specific document, but I will reflect on her suggestion of a wider airports strategy; I am sure that we will discuss it further when I am in front of her Committee in a couple of weeks' time.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement. I echo her words and those of others in expressing my gratitude to the firefighters and other emergency workers who fought the fire and to the airport, airline and other staff for all their hard work in the face of this catastrophic systems failure.

What has happened is clearly a rare occurrence, but it raises a number of significant questions about the security and management of our critical national infrastructure. While I am pleased to hear that no foul play is currently suspected, the event has revealed vulnerabilities in our national security that may be exploited in future by terrorists and hostile state actors. It is consequently vital that lessons are learned to ensure that an incident like this does not happen again, and I welcome the announcement of a full investigation.

It is deeply concerning that the failure of a single piece of infrastructure has taken down the entire airport. Heathrow is connected to three substations, and while two were impacted, the third was running and had enough capacity—thought to be around 72 MW—to power the whole of Heathrow, which requires a little more than 40 MW. It is evident that Heathrow's power set-up could not be swiftly reconfigured to allow the third substation to be used. We need to understand why that was, and whether it could be remedied in future. While Heathrow claims that it is normal for airports not to have sufficient back-up capacity to power all of their needs, other industries that require even more power than Heathrow—such as data centres—take more robust steps to ensure they have sufficient back-up systems to counter such failures. Should our key international transport hub not have the same safeguards?

We must also not forget those whose journeys were disrupted. It is estimated that over 200,000 passengers have been impacted by the event. However, under current regulations, most of those passengers will not be eligible for compensation. As such, I have three questions for the Secretary of State. First, what impact, if any, will this incident have on the Government's plans for expansion at Heathrow? Can the national grid infrastructure cope with a third runway, or will the airport become more prone to failure? Secondly, does the Secretary of State believe that UK airports should be taking steps to

increase their back-up capacity, in order to ensure that an incident like this does not happen again? Thirdly, does she believe that the current regulations around passenger compensation are sufficient?

Heidi Alexander: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his questions. The question of Heathrow expansion and this very rare—unprecedented—event are two entirely separate issues. He will be aware that the Government have invited Heathrow to bring forward proposals for a third runway, and we will review the airports national policy statement after that.

With regard to back-up capacity at airports, I am told that the back-up power systems at Heathrow operated as they should have done during this incident—they did not fail. I do not want to come to knee-jerk conclusions as a result of this unprecedented incident, but we will be looking very closely at the two reviews I mentioned in my statement. I have also worked with the Civil Aviation Authority to ensure that passengers who have been affected by this disruption are aware of their rights.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): Heathrow is in my constituency, as is the substation that caught fire, so I join other Members in thanking the firefighters who worked so hard to get this incident under control so quickly and at some risk. I also thank the police and the council officers who helped to evacuate 150 of my constituents from their homes. I was there on the day and met some of the residents, and I will be writing to them all so that we can pick up lessons from what they experienced on that day and build those lessons in.

Now that this site has gained such a high profile, there are concerns about its security for the future. I would welcome some more detailed information coming out of the inquiry about how we will secure the site for the future, not just from accident but from potential attack.

Heidi Alexander: My right hon. Friend raises a fair point. I will ensure that we provide that information to him once we have reviewed the different reports that are going to be published over the next couple of months.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The Secretary of State mentioned consumer rights. Not only were Heathrow customers delayed and disrupted, but they were ripped off, with huge hikes for alternative flights, car hire and hotels. Is it not time that the Government brought forward robust anti-price-gouging legislation? In fairness to the Secretary of State and Labour Front Benchers, I also asked the previous Government, who did absolutely zero on this issue as well. [*Laughter.*] It is true, and I think we saw the result of that in many other ways. On behalf of the British consumer and international consumers, many of whom have been ripped off through no fault of their own as a result of this incident, is it not time that for new legislation? Should we not also carry out a wider review of the monopoly held by the operators of hotels at Heathrow and the lack of competition among airlines coming into Heathrow?

Heidi Alexander: I can categorically say that it would not be right for anyone or any business to capitalise on this disruption. Whether airlines or hotels, I would expect organisations to be doing everything they can to support travellers who have been disrupted by this incident.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): The Secretary of State's statement underlines why it is important to avoid speculation in the immediate aftermath of a critical incident such as this. Can she reassure the House that if any systematic risks are identified that potentially affect other major airports, there will be a co-ordinated response? If any such issues are identified at regional and local airports, will Members of this House in proximity to those airports be kept informed?

Heidi Alexander: I am happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her answers. Of course, this is not the first time there has been a problem with Heathrow. Back in August 2023, UK air traffic control problems caused chaos. In July '24, faulty software caused chaos again. We are always hoping that Heathrow is getting better. After the incident in the early hours of last Friday morning, 290,000 passengers—I was one of them, by the way—found themselves stuck somewhere in a queue. That includes many of my constituents, and they had trouble getting home, too. They have been contacting me over the weekend to tell me their stories.

The incident poses questions about whether the current operators are capable of running a third runway, if this fire caused a complete shutdown. Reports indicate that complete closure was not required. Confidence in travelling and in Heathrow are at an all-time low among my constituents and others. Has the Secretary of State made Heathrow officials aware of the need to ensure that contingency plans are not simply notes on paper, but actions to take during a crisis? What has been their response to allay fears caused by the turmoil of last weekend?

Heidi Alexander: I do not think anyone underestimates the distress and disruption that this incident caused. Having spoken directly with Heathrow's chief executive on a number of occasions, I know that he is fully aware of that. This is an unprecedented event of significant magnitude. Day in, day out, Heathrow successfully provides services to hundreds of thousands of passengers and businesses. While it is right that we do everything we can to interrogate the causes of this incident and learn any lessons, I believe that Heathrow airport can continue to be a trusted partner for Government in the longer term.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The power outage, which had such a significant effect on Heathrow and its immediate surroundings, has raised real concerns about resilience and back-up in our energy system for major infrastructure projects and sites. The Government have plans for a significant expansion of our clean energy electricity networks, so can the Secretary of State say to what extent the Government will build into their clean power plans the greater resilience and back-up that this worrying example at Heathrow has emphasised are so badly needed?

Heidi Alexander: I can confidently say that as we transition to clean power, resilience will remain key in the delivery of our power network. I do not think that anything changes as a result of our determination to move to clean power, but I am happy to continue discussions with colleagues in the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero to make sure that that is the case.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Following that last question, can the Secretary of State give us an absolute assurance that nothing in our drive towards green energy and net zero will ever affect the sustainability and safety of our vital transport systems?

Heidi Alexander: I can give the right hon. Gentleman that assurance. I am aware that some other Members of this House—not present in the Chamber today—were busy peddling some myths on Friday morning about this issue. It is clear to me that Heathrow's back-up power supplies consist of both diesel and electricity generators. No matter what some other Members might be saying, those systems did work. I can give the right hon. Gentleman the assurance that he seeks.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): Fires at electricity substations are not unheard of, and it seems that there may have been a considerable lack of preparedness at Heathrow. When the Secretary of State receives her reviews, will she look into what preparedness there was, and what scenarios those at Heathrow had envisaged for dealing with possible outages of this kind and getting their operations up and running again as quickly as possible?

Heidi Alexander: I think that the Kelly review will be looking at that. My hon. Friend makes a fair point about preparedness as well as resilience, which I will be discussing with those at Heathrow in the future.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): The level of disruption caused by the fire and the subsequent closure of Heathrow airport have highlighted the importance of reliable aviation connectivity to our daily lives, as well as the fragility of much of our UK infrastructure. The National Infrastructure Commission published reports in 2020, 2023 and 2024 calling for the Government to implement standards and frameworks for resilience in key sectors such as telecoms, water, transport and energy. Does the Secretary of State agree that this incident shows how important such standards would be, and will those in the appropriate Department pick up the reports which, I am sure, found their way on to their desks over the weekend and start to implement their recommendations?

Heidi Alexander: I think they are already doing that, because the review of resilience that was announced by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster last July is looking at the subject in the context of our critical national infrastructure.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): I rarely disagree with my right hon. Friend, but I am not sure that this major incident can be entirely divorced from Heathrow's plans for a third runway. It is precisely because it is up against densely populated communities that the effects were so devastating, with tens of thousands of people losing power, hundreds being evacuated, and part of the M4 being closed. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that as part of any consideration of a 50% expansion of Heathrow—which would presumably make problems such as this 50% worse—she will at least look into the risks, and the resilience, that would be consequences of such an expansion?

Heidi Alexander: I doubt that it necessarily follows that an expanded Heathrow that accommodated twice as many flights as it does currently would make an incident such as the one that we saw on Friday any more likely. This was an unprecedented fire of a significant scale. However, I can assure my hon. Friend that before making any decisions about the expansion of Heathrow, we will ensure that any proposals that may be forthcoming comply with all our legislative requirements.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): The Secretary of State mentioned that many families were evacuated from their properties. Safety is clearly of paramount importance, but only a few days ago NatPower UK informed me that it wanted to build an enormous electrical substation in my constituency. Once NESO has reported on this matter, will the Secretary of State please help to organise a meeting with the relevant Energy Minister so that we can discuss its findings and link them with any proposal for a new substation in my constituency?

Mr Speaker: A tenuous link.

Heidi Alexander: The relevant Energy Minister—my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen (Michael Shanks), who is sitting next to me—was nodding, which suggests to me that he would be happy to have such a meeting.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement, and for the way in which she has approached this very serious issue. Heathrow is clearly a vital piece of national infrastructure; it is also central to the economy of west London and the Thames valley, and plays an important part in the attraction of inward investment to our region. As the Secretary of State works with the authors of the two reviews, will she also liaise with the local business community and local authorities in the Thames valley and ensure that they are kept fully abreast of the work that is carried out in the reviews?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend has made a fair point, and I am happy to give him that undertaking.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I again urge the Secretary of State not to divorce the question of expansion from what has happened here. Surely what this incident, crippling Europe's busiest airport, shows us is that we need a better Heathrow, not a bigger Heathrow. We need to focus on the infrastructure in and around Heathrow, to improve resilience, security and the passenger experience. While a third runway may not increase the likelihood of such an incident, the impact of such an incident will be all the greater if she continues to put all our aviation eggs in one basket.

Heidi Alexander: Let me assure the hon. Lady that I am not putting all the country's aviation eggs in one basket. At the moment we do not have proposals before us for a third runway at Heathrow. We will look at those proposals carefully when they are submitted and ensure that any decisions about either the airports national policy statement or any subsequent development consent order are taken in line with our environmental obligations on things such as carbon, air pollution and noise. Consideration of the resilience of the infrastructure will be part of that.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): A “national embarrassment”, a “laughing stock globally”, “shocking”; with memes doing the rounds, those are just some of the words that could be used to describe this weekend's events at Heathrow. While right hon. Members on our Defence Committee and the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy were busy discussing hybrid and cyber-threats from our adversaries, our nation's biggest port was taken down by a single substation fire. Does my right hon. Friend the Transport Secretary agree that, while my Slough constituents and people across the country are not bothered with the blame game that is now under way, this event should be a wake-up call regarding the resilience of our national infrastructure, and there should be no repeat?

Heidi Alexander: This was an unprecedented event and Heathrow stood up its resilience plans swiftly. Within 18 hours of the fire starting, planes were once again landing at the airport. For an airport the size of Heathrow, that is no mean feat. It is right both that an internal review of the airport crisis management and resilience plans takes place, and that the Government have commissioned the review that will be conducted by NESO.

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): The Secretary of State has indicated that she spoke to the chief executive of Heathrow on Friday and again this morning. I would like to think that, with an incident of this scale, there were ministerial contacts throughout the weekend, possibly on a more than daily basis, given the impact it had on so many people. Will she commit to urgently reviewing the DFT's response to this major incident, in addition to Heathrow's? She will also be aware that airports the length and breadth of the UK are vital transport hubs and linked to critical infrastructure, such as Aberdeen airport and, in my constituency, Inverness airport, with dozens of helicopter flights servicing offshore oil and gas and renewables infrastructure; and airports are also home to air ambulances, police helicopters and coastguard services. Will she therefore commit also to reviewing the level of operational resilience in those and other locations that host services critical to people's wellbeing and to energy security and national security?

Heidi Alexander: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that, in addition to the conversations I had with the chief executive of Heathrow, I was updated throughout the weekend by my officials on what was happening at the airport. I am happy to write to him about the wider point he raises.

James Asser (West Ham and Beckton) (Lab): As the Secretary of State is aware, my constituency contains London City airport, which sits closely alongside residential and business buildings, so safety is something we are very alive to. It is also an area of massive regeneration, so we are also alive to power pressure, and that part of her statement will be interesting for my constituents. Can she assure us not only that the review and the lessons learned will be shared, but that we will look at how they can be adapted, so that other airports can adjust and carry out future-proofing for their resilience, and so that we are not just learning lessons after the event?

Heidi Alexander: I am very happy to give my hon. Friend that commitment.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that what happened on Thursday and Friday is a complete national embarrassment and should never have happened? Will she do an assessment of our remaining airports to ensure not only that they also have multiple supply points for electricity, but that they do not rely on the illusion, as plainly happened at Heathrow, that those multiple supply points made it completely reliable as a hub airport? That appears at first glance to have been the case for Heathrow, and it is not adequate.

Heidi Alexander: Perhaps the right hon. Member was not listening when I responded to questions from this side of the Chamber. There were multiple power supply points to the airport, but Heathrow took the decision that it needed to reconfigure the supply in the airport, as terminals 2 and 4 were very badly affected. It decided to put the safety and security of the travelling public first. It powered down all those systems and then powered them up again. I was not in the room when those decisions were taken. Heathrow is a private company, and it took decisions about what it thought was best for the travelling public. I, as Transport Secretary, am not going to second-guess those, but I will ensure that we do very thorough reviews. I will interrogate those reviews very carefully and ensure that any lessons we need to learn are acted upon.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for updating the House. As well as being one of the busiest airports in the world in its own right, Heathrow is also a crucial hub, meaning that connector airports, such as Newcastle International and others, are really impacted by any issues at Heathrow. Can she please assure me not only that a proper investigation is taking place, but that we will learn the lessons and ensure that there are no more such issues, and will she keep the House updated in the meantime?

Heidi Alexander: I recognise that Heathrow provides really important connectivity for our regional airports, and therefore for my hon. Friend's constituents. I can assure her that I will keep the House updated, once both the internal review commissioned by Heathrow comes back and the report by NESO has been published.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Obviously, this event was on a catastrophic scale, but there is regular disruption at Heathrow. One of the consequences of that is the wholesale cancellation of flights between Heathrow and Scotland, which I have raised previously in this Chamber. When Ruth Kelly does her report on Heathrow's resilience, will she look at its wider resilience and its ability to cope with weather-related or other technical issues, so that they do not lead to the wholesale cancellation of flights between Scotland and London?

Heidi Alexander: I am not writing the terms of reference for the Kelly review, because it has been commissioned by Heathrow airport itself, and I hesitate to stand at the Dispatch Box and try to amend the terms of a private

company's review. The aviation Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), tells me that the right hon. Gentleman has written to him about this issue, and he is due to come back to him on it. The matter is also being considered by the aviation futures forum.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement, and I add to the comments made by other Members by thanking those who dealt with this terrible incident at the time. It obviously had a huge impact on passengers, including residents in Harlow looking to get to the US. What reassurance can she give passengers that this was due to an unprecedented power outage? Does this add to the case for other airports such as Stansted, which employs some of my constituents, having greater resilience, greater capacity and, potentially, even transatlantic flights?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend is tempting me to make a whole series of interesting comments about Stansted. I can assure him that when we get the reviews back, we will look at their implications for other airports, including Stansted, which provides employment for a number of his constituents.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): The fire and Heathrow closure will have impacted not only on travellers and on goods and services, but on the employees and contractors who work at Heathrow. Could the Secretary of State reassure me and those workers that she will urge all employers at Heathrow to ensure that staff who were due to work but were unable to do so, through no fault of their own, will be paid for that day?

Heidi Alexander: I am grateful for that question. I must admit that it is not a subject I have, to date, discussed with the chief executive of Heathrow, but I am happy to follow it up for the hon. Gentleman and come back to him.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for all her hard work on this matter over the weekend. Can she reassure my constituents that our energy resilience remains high, and that the holidays they have saved long and hard for will not be disrupted by similar incidents at regional airports up and down the country? Will she also look into the particular impact that such outages have on disabled passengers?

Heidi Alexander: I will look at the specific issue my hon. Friend raises about disabled passengers, but I would like to reassure her and her constituents that I am confident that our airports and critical national infrastructure are resilient. I recognise that significant disruption was caused on this occasion. The NESO review will tell us if there are any other actions we need to take, but I am confident about our current arrangements.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): It is, first, really important to emphasise that energy infrastructure is generally safe. However, the example on Friday indicated that things can go wrong. What is the Secretary of State, alongside her Government colleagues, doing to address over-industrialisation in certain areas? In Kintore and Leylodge in my constituency, we have a 275 kV substation

next to a 400 kV substation, with a 3 GW hydrogen plant and nine battery storage sites in the planning. Together, there is a huge risk, if we consider that a fire was able to start on Friday.

Heidi Alexander: All these risks are considered in the round, but if the hon. Lady wants to write to an appropriate Minister in another Department and copy me in, I would be happy to follow up on those discussions.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): Following the incident at Heathrow, will the Secretary of State commit to investing in regional airports, such as Blackpool airport, to diversify our air travel options and support local economies such as mine in Blackpool South, and therefore reduce our reliance on major hubs?

Heidi Alexander: Mr Speaker, I am really very sorry, but I did not quite catch the question. If my hon. Friend would like to write to me, I will ensure I come back to him.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): The Secretary of State has, perfectly fairly, said that some of the specific learning about the incident will have to wait until we know more, but she also said that she has been told that, as a matter of design, the back-up power arrangements for Heathrow were not intended to cover all airport operations until, as we know, a significant reconfiguration took place over a matter of hours. Will she assure that she can and will begin the work of considering whether that is the right position, not just for Heathrow but for other airports? I make no predetermination on her behalf on whether it is or is not, but she can surely do that now without waiting for the specifics of this incident all to be clear.

Heidi Alexander: Heathrow, as a private company, is responsible for developing its own resilience plans. This is an issue that will be considered properly by the Kelly review, but the right hon. and learned Gentleman is right: I have been told that the back-up power systems were not designed to provide power for the entire airport. When I discussed the matter with the chief executive of Heathrow on Friday, he told me that is quite typical for an airport the size of Heathrow, but I am sure it is an issue the Kelly review will be looking at.

Lillian Jones (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and associate myself with the comments of gratitude towards the firefighters and airport staff who responded to the incident. Will my right hon. Friend confirm that passengers have sufficient rights to receive support and compensation when these kinds of external events disrupt their plans?

Heidi Alexander: Airlines are responsible for providing passengers with a refund within seven days, or to be re-routed to their destination under the same conditions, with required suitable accommodation and food. That is the airlines' responsibility. We have advertised the rights of passengers via the Civil Aviation Authority in recent days to ensure that people are aware. Those are the provisions that exist within our law to compensate people who have been affected by this type of disruption.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): In any modern economy, it is clear that the resilience of critical national infrastructure faces many risks and threats, and that resilience goes hand in hand with our national security. Does the Secretary of State agree that the incident and other risks we face demonstrate that the role of the Prime Minister's national security adviser should be bolstered to more prominently cover national security and critical infrastructure resilience?

Heidi Alexander: I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government will do everything in their power to learn the lessons from this incident and ensure that our critical national infrastructure is protected and resilient as we move forward.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): The Secretary of State said in her statement that the review by the National Energy System Operator will seek to learn wider lessons for energy resilience and critical national infrastructure. Will that review include the infrastructure in Northern Ireland, specifically Belfast international airport in my constituency and Belfast City airport?

Heidi Alexander: My understanding is that the grid is separate in Northern Ireland. I will take away the hon. Gentleman's question and consider with colleagues the appropriate geographical scope of the NESO review. The terms of reference have not yet been finalised, so I will come back to him on that.

Point of Order

4.30 pm

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On Saturday 22 March, 11 Labour MPs campaigned in my constituency, the majority of whom neglected to inform me. I am well aware that Labour is desperate to hang on to the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough mayoralty. Having parted company with the current Labour mayor at the eleventh hour, after he was found guilty of breaching the code of conduct during his term, it has panic-selected the only candidate who could be found at short notice—someone who already lost the police and crime commissioner election last year—and is desperately pouring MPs into my constituency to campaign against Paul Bristow.

As a matter of courtesy, I would have expected Members to notify me of their visit. While new Members could feign ignorance, a Secretary of State and a junior Minister should know better.

Mr Speaker: First, all MPs should notify other Members when going to their constituencies. I will stamp down when Members do not show that courtesy—please do so. Yes, election fever is coming, but that is no excuse for Members not to inform other Members that they are coming to campaign. I do not know who the Minister and the Secretary of State are, but it gives them absolutely no right to do so without notifying the Member. They should know better. I say to all Members on both sides, please observe the courtesies of the House and inform other Members.

Planning and Infrastructure Bill

Second Reading

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): The reasoned amendment in the name of Gideon Amos has not been selected.

4.32 pm

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

It is time to get Britain building again. It is what working people expect of this Government and it is what we will deliver. Our Planning and Infrastructure Bill is critical to achieving economic growth, higher living standards and a more secure future for our country. This is our plan for change in action: action to build 1.5 million homes in this Parliament and a fast track of 150 major infrastructure projects—more than were decided over the 14 years of the previous Government. The Bill is also key to making Britain a clean energy superpower, bringing down bills for working people and securing our energy supply in a more uncertain world.

Make no mistake: the Bill will transform the lives of working people and Britain's prospects for years to come. It is hugely ambitious, and rightly so. Everywhere I go, I hear the same frustrations: "We just can't build anything any more," and, "We desperately need more homes and more development." For too long, the answer has always been no, which has choked growth, leaving working people worse off and leaving Britain behind, with trains that do not work, roads that are clogged and not enough homes being built.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I gently say to the Secretary of State that none of my constituents is saying, "In Shropshire, we don't need any more homes. We don't want any more homes." They just want to be consulted. They want the homes in the right place, at the right scale, with the right architecture and in the right numbers. They want their voices listened to through a local plan—not ignored, as the current Government are doing.

Angela Rayner: I gently say to the right hon. Member that it is this Government who have brought forward mandatory local plans, and it was his Government who did not. For too long we have left home ownership to collapse, with homelessness soaring and over 160,000 children in temporary accommodation. This is a country that simply is not working.

The time it takes to secure planning permission for major projects has almost doubled in the last decade, and it now takes more than four years. It is slower and more costly to build big infrastructure in England than in France and Italy. No new reservoir has been built for over 30 years. There are countless other examples, such as the critical new road improvement scheme for Norwich, which would create jobs and speed up journeys yet was held up for two years by unsuccessful legal challenges. We have the ridiculous situation where 139 desperately needed houses were delayed in Bingley because of a row over the speed of balls at the neighbouring cricket club.

The result of such delays has been fewer homes built, higher energy bills, and lower productivity and growth. For 14 years, the country has been crying out for a

Government with the will to change that. Successive Tory Prime Ministers promised that change, but when the bold action was demanded they were too afraid to stand up to their Back Benchers.

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): Can the Secretary of State outline what powers in the Bill she will use to take on developers and make sure that they build based on the planning permissions they already have?

Angela Rayner: The hon. Member will know as a member of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee that we have already made changes through the national planning policy framework, and we have our new homes accelerator programme, which is already providing thousands of homes. The Bill is about building on those powers to ensure that we get Britain building. It was his Government who did not build the houses and the infrastructure that we desperately need and who were too timid to face down the vested interests. This Labour Government are on the side of the builders, not the blockers, and we are saying, “No more.”

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): There is nobody who does not welcome the 1.5 million houses target, and it is important that we see those homes. Part of infrastructure is electric vehicle charging systems. Many people I ask about electric cars say that they are not getting one because there are not enough charging points. Clause 43 indicates that there will be more EV charge points. Is that something the Secretary of State will share with the relevant Minister in Northern Ireland? I also understand that some of the standard accessibility requirements do not meet the standards. Can she confirm that that will be changed?

Angela Rayner: The Bill will streamline the approval of street works needed for the installation of EV charge points, removing the need for licensing where works are able to be authorised by permits, because we recognise that people need that critical infrastructure as part of these reforms.

We have taken more action in eight months than the Opposition managed in 14 years of government. We have reversed the damaging changes made by the Tories to the national planning policy framework and have brought green belt into the 21st century. We have ended the de facto ban on new onshore wind, and we are supporting local authorities with an additional 300 planning officers. Just this month, we set out reforms to put growth at the heart of the statutory consultee system.

Many would have said, “Stop there and allow the reforms to bed in,” but Britain cannot afford to wait. We have been held back for too long by Governments without the will to drive change. This landmark Planning and Infrastructure Bill goes even further and faster.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on championing the expansion of affordable and social housing in particular. I ask her to take account of another excluded group: Gypsies and Travellers. They have been systematically discriminated against by the Conservatives over 14 years. There is no assessment of needs or statutory duty to provide sites any longer, and they are not in the strategic

planning provisions. Can we rectify that in the Bill so that we have a level playing field for everybody who is in need of housing?

Angela Rayner: We are working with local authorities, and the Bill includes provision for strategic authorities so that we can look at where we have sites and ensure that people are accommodated. It is for local authorities to be able to do that.

The Bill starts with a quicker and more certain system for big ticket infrastructure projects. It will slice through the bureaucracy and speed up transport projects. It will overhaul how Government decisions on major infrastructure projects can be challenged, so that meritless cases will have one, rather than three, attempts at a legal challenge, stopping cases from being dragged endlessly and needlessly through the courts.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): Somewhere knocking around in the system is a Government press release that says that the National Grid Sea Link project is being obstructed by too many objections. The reason that it is being objected to is that the National Grid wants to build a 90-foot-high converter station the size of five football pitches on the Minster marshes in Kent. We must have the right to object to that kind of project.

Angela Rayner: I gently say to the right hon. Gentleman that there is not a loss of the right to object. In fact, we are strengthening and clarifying those processes as part of the Bill. I will say it again: there will be a quicker and more certain system for big ticket infrastructure projects. The Bill will slice through bureaucracy and speed up transport projects. What it will not do is allow meritless cases to have three attempts at a legal challenge. It will stop cases from being dragged endlessly and needlessly through the courts. It will begin to strip away the unnecessary consultation requirements that do nothing to improve applications and do not meaningfully engage communities, but slow down the delivery of infrastructure that will benefit communities in the future. It will create greater flexibility so that projects can go through a more appropriate and faster planning route.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): The Secretary of State will understand that when a number of nationally strategic infrastructure projects are in one area, that has a huge impact. In my constituency we are looking at a strategic rail interchange, a major solar plant and the East West Rail project. Will she reassure my constituents that their voices will be heard under the Bill? Will she reassure us that when these issues go to the Planning Inspectorate and to the Secretary of State, the cumulative effect of national projects that are not present in local plans will be considered before decisions are taken?

Angela Rayner: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we will consult on the draft we have put forward. We want better and quality engagement as part of the Bill. Our changes will ensure that everyone works together early on, and that we have proportionate and faster decisions. We will make sure that the Government’s infrastructure policies are updated at least every five years, but the measures in the Bill are not the limit of our ambitions.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): The Secretary of State is outlining the process by which essential infrastructure needs to be built, but she will forgive me for coming back to Heathrow expansion. I would be extremely grateful if she could set out for us—perhaps not today, but later or in writing—the exact process for considering the expansion of Heathrow under the new legislation. In addition, could she explain why those who will be affected by compulsory purchase will now be removed as consultees at the pre-application stage?

Angela Rayner: I will not get into the details of any particular planning process, but I will say that the Bill is about better and quality engagement. Of course, statutory consultees will continue to be engaged, but what we do not want is major infrastructure projects continually being blocked for years and years. People have been speaking about some of these projects for decades, and we still do not have the connectivity that we desperately need.

We are open to strengthening the Bill, and we will give serious consideration to proposals that further our objectives. We will continue to engage with colleagues across the House, as well as with business and communities, on what might be done about existing requirements that are not working as they should. We are clear that where once the answer was always no, to get Britain building, to drive growth and to deliver opportunity, the answer must now be yes.

The Bill is also geared towards another crucial pledge: building the new homes that we need. We will boost house building in England by streamlining planning decisions.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I warmly welcome the steps being taken to streamline the system and get more homes built. That, of course, includes social and affordable housing. Does the Secretary of State agree that that would go some way to helping the 160,000 children who are stuck in temporary accommodation?

Angela Rayner: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing the debate back to why we are all here and why we are in this mess in the first place. Over Christmas, when we all got to see our family and friends, I was thinking about the 160,000 children in temporary accommodation. During the general election campaign, one thing I was clear on was that we have to move forward to build the homes that people desperately need—behind every single one of those statistics is a family or an opportunity that is not being realised—and one of this Government's missions is to strengthen that.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): If the Government are going to build 1.5 million homes over the course of this Parliament, and we are nine months into the first year of this Parliament, by my calculation they should have built 225,000 by now. Will the Secretary of State confirm how many homes have been built?

Angela Rayner: The hon. Gentleman has just given us an example of the mess the previous Government left us in. House building was going backwards, and they were nowhere near the figures they promised. That is why, within the first few months of us getting into power, we changed the national planning policy framework. We have been consulting, we have been working with industry, we have

had a new homes accelerator—thousands more have been put into the system—and £2 billion for the affordable homes programme has been announced today.

We will boost house building in England by streamlining planning decisions, introducing a national scheme of delegation that sets out which types of application should be determined by officers and which by planning committees. Local democratic oversight is crucial to ensuring good development, but the right decisions must be taken at the right level to get Britain building.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): The Deputy Prime Minister is giving an excellent speech about the importance of building homes. She mentioned the importance of getting young people out of temporary accommodation, which I wholly support. Does she agree that it is not just about temporary accommodation but about families who are suffering from overcrowding, families in unsuitable accommodation and families at risk of homelessness, with the anxiety that brings? My inbox is full of that from residents in Harlow.

Angela Rayner: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Not only have the Government inherited a really dire house building situation—we will turn the tide and build 1.5 million homes—but we have seen homelessness levels rise. The previous Government promised to end section 21 no-fault evictions but did not; we are going to do it. We will also bring in Awaab's law, which will protect people in the rented sector. There is so much wrong with our housing system. The Government are starting to turn the tide on that. This Bill is one crucial step in the overall picture of what we are doing to improve circumstances for people, whether they want to buy a home, whether they are in a home or whether they are in privately rented accommodation.

I turn back to the planning committees. We will bring in new controls over the size of planning committees, increasing the pace and quality of decision making while maintaining robust debate. We are introducing mandatory training for planning committee members to improve their expertise while allowing councils to set their own planning fees to cover their costs, with a promise that that money will be reinvested in the system to help speed it up.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): I welcome much of what the Bill will do. It will speeding up the planning system, which as a chartered surveyor who has practised in planning is I know desperately needed if we are to get more houses built. However, the one area of the Bill that I have concerns about is what she has just come on to. If local people feel completely overridden by their planning system, they will feel very hard done by. If we are to override local people, we might just as well have a nationally directed planning system rather than a local planning system. Will she think carefully about that balance?

Angela Rayner: I recognise the hon. Gentleman's expertise in this area, and he is absolutely right to say that there has to be a balance; that is why the Bill sets out that controversial schemes will still go to full planning committees. I am sure he would recognise that there are other areas where local planners could do some of that work. If we set out the rules clearly, we can make the process better, so that where there is more need for that engagement—with the mandatory training for those on

planning committees—we will get a better result. I hope the hon. Member will continue to engage with us in that vein.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the £2 billion in extra money for social homes being announced today and the 150 new nationally significant infrastructure projects for which the Bill will pave the way. We are the party of the builders, not the blockers, so more importantly we need more builders. That is why the £600 million announced for a new army of 60,000 more brickies, electricians and engineers is very welcome. Can I suggest that Rochdale's Hopwood Hall college, which has a brilliant record in training construction workers, is included in this project?

Angela Rayner: As my hon. Friend says, 10 colleges of excellence were announced as part of the £600 million funding and 60,000 new apprenticeships. By giving our young people opportunities, this is part of making work pay. It will be fantastic, and I hope my hon. Friend will be engaged in that process. My colleagues in Government will have heard what he said. As a fellow Greater Manchester MP, I feel that Greater Manchester definitely should be part of that process.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): To pick up on the tone of the comments made about blockers, I knock on many doors in my constituency and find the narrative about nimbys blocking housing and people not wanting homes built in their constituency to be untrue. People recognise the need for additional homes for themselves, their children and the growing population, but what they worry about is infrastructure. This Bill does not include mandatory infrastructure targets, and that is why residents are so sceptical. Given their inability to get GP appointments at the moment, with additional homes and additional demand they will struggle even more. How can we reassure them that those needs will be met in the future?

Angela Rayner: Let me be clear: I do not call people of this country the blockers. I do not see that when I am out and about; I never saw it during the general election campaign. People want this development. The hon. Member makes an important point about infrastructure; people often say that the infrastructure is not there. This Bill streamlines infrastructure. I think it goes some way towards doing the work. It is not everything; we have to do a lot of other things, like we have done with section 106, for example. Under the previous Government, we often did not get the benefit of that, because people wriggled out of their obligations. I appreciate the tone of the hon. Member's remarks. This Government are going to make sure that we build the houses that people want, where they want them, with consultation and with the critical infrastructure that they need.

At the same time, we will unlock land for housing and infrastructure by reforming the compulsory purchase process, ensuring that important projects that deliver public benefits—such as many more social and affordable homes—are given the green light, and that compensation paid to landowners is not excessive.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I warmly welcome the changes to hope value in order to build more affordable homes, but will the Secretary of State clarify

whether that will also apply to wider projects for community benefit such as playing fields? Udney Park in Teddington in my constituency has lain derelict for over a decade as successive owners have wanted to develop it but cannot do so. There is a huge demand for community playing fields and the community wants to be able to access that land. Will she assure me that the hope value changes will apply much more broadly than just to affordable housing?

Angela Rayner: I hope that the hon. Member continues to engage, because we want to make sure that we can go as wide as we possibly can so that we get the land that is needed and we can build the houses that we desperately need. We are also doing work within the devolution Bill, which will be coming forward, around compulsory purchase on other assets of public value that are not for building on. That touches on the point that the hon. Member has raised.

We are also strengthening development corporations to make it easier to deliver the housing projects we need. Those corporations delivered previous generations of new towns. This Labour Government are building on our post-war legacy by giving them enhanced powers to help deliver our next generation of new towns. These will be communities built with local people in mind, with the affordable housing, GP surgeries, schools and public transport that working people expect and need.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): The Deputy Prime Minister and I have a mutual passion: she too is a great fan of His Majesty's work on the built environment and ensuring the high quality of design. One concern that a lot of people have is seeing the quality of design eroded, so that we see the same design in Kent as we do in Staffordshire. Would she look at what could be done to enhance design codes, because it feels like they have been eroded not enhanced?

Angela Rayner: The right hon. Gentleman reminds me of our time sparring at the Dispatch Box, but I am glad that I am on the Government side now. *[Interruption.]* I beg to differ.

The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about design, and we are covering that in our new towns. He is right that His Majesty is also passionate about this; I think everybody is to be honest—nobody wants to live in an ugly home. Design is important, and it is different in different places: Yorkshire is different from Manchester, which is different from Devon. Ensuring that design is part of the process is crucial, but it must not prevent us from going forward. That is why we have clarified some of the issues around “beautiful” in the NPPF that were holding things up. I want to reassure Members across the House that we expect safe homes, beautiful homes and homes fit for the future in terms of renewables and energy efficiency.

To meet our net zero ambitions and drive growth, the Bill will speed up approvals for clean energy projects. Some projects currently face waits of over 10 years—another legacy of Tory failure. With a first ready, first connected system replacing the flawed first come, first served approach, and with £200 billion of investment unlocking growth through “Clean Power by 2030”, our reforms will protect households from the rollercoaster of foreign

[Angela Rayner]

fossil fuel markets and usher in a new era of energy independence, in which despots like Putin can no longer have their boot on the nation's throat.

Britain's electricity grid needs a 21st century overhaul to connect the right power in the right places, which is why our plans for vital energy projects needed for clean power, including wind and solar projects, will be prioritised for grid connections, with those living within 500 metres of new pylons getting up to £250 a year off their electricity bills. We recognise the service of these communities in hosting the infrastructure that will lower everyone's energy bills.

Bradley Thomas: The Deputy Prime Minister makes an important point about the access to energy that all our communities require. Particularly prominent in all our minds, at a time when we recognise that food security is national security, is the displacement of high-quality agricultural land and, in effect, energy becoming a new cash crop. Will she assure the House that we are not at risk of falling into that trap and that we will not displace high-quality agricultural land for energy?

Angela Rayner: I can assure the hon. Member—I gave him two chances; I must like him—that we will protect high-quality agricultural land. Farmers have used land in various ways throughout the decades and generations, and we will protect our high-quality agricultural land.

Finally, I want to turn to the measures in the Bill on development and nature recovery. We have some incredibly important habits and species in this country, and the Government could not have been clearer in our manifesto that we are committed to improving outcomes for nature.

Olivia Bailey (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on a fantastic speech and a great piece of legislation that will turbocharge our plans to restore nature at scale and build the homes that we need. Will she say a little more about how the Bill could help us to restore our precious chalk streams, such as the River Pang in my constituency?

Angela Rayner: The Bill is about how we can do nature recovery and protect nature. We think that it is a win-win. Under the previous Government, all sorts of problems held us up, and we tried to work with the then Government but they would not work with us. That is why they are now on the Opposition Benches and we are on the Government Benches, building.

I am sure that all Members across the House share the goal of improving outcomes for nature, but I am also confident that no one here thinks that the system is working well. Any set of rules that results in a £100 million bat tunnel is an outrage. I know that Opposition Members agree, but they were determined to take a clumsy approach to fixing nutrient neutrality that risked ripping up environmental protections and would not have worked.

Thanks to a collaborative effort with organisations across the development and environmental sectors, our Bill sets out a better way. That is a win-win for development and for nature. The Bill establishes a nature restoration fund that will allow developers to make a simple payment to discharge their environmental obligations, and to

crack on with the building of the homes and infrastructure projects that we desperately need. Natural England will use that money to take the action needed not just to avoid further decline in our natural world, but to bring about improvement.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is reassuring to hear that the right hon. Lady is so passionate about restoring nature. How, then, can she explain the fact that planning permission, which the local council had refused, has been granted for a battery energy storage system on the green belt in Walsall?

Angela Rayner: I will not comment on individual projects, but we have been clear about nature recovery and protecting our natural spaces, as set out in the Bill. That is how we will put talk of newts and nutrient neutrality behind us and get Britain building, while stopping the pointless pitting of nature against development.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): The problems caused by the previous Government's failure to tackle nutrient neutrality mean that north Cumbria faces significant house building issues. I strongly welcome the Bill's provisions on the nature restoration fund. Will the Department work with the local authority to develop mitigation schemes that will get house building going in north Cumbria in the interim?

Angela Rayner: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that long-standing issue. The Government are already engaging with the local authority in her area. She is absolutely right: for too long the previous Government were not listening. In the other place, and when I was in opposition, we tried to work with them on these issues and they refused.

The Bill is our reform to mark a new era for Britain. We are turning the page on the years of defeatism and decline in which this country of extraordinary talent and capability was held back by a system that was hobbled at every turn. With these landmark reforms, we are not just putting more money into the pockets of working people and strengthening communities; we are taking a major step forward to secure our country's future for the long term. We are getting Britain building again, getting growth going and paving the way for national renewal. This is real delivery and real change to transform the lives of millions of people for years to come. I commend the Bill to the House.

5.4 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I am pleased to lead the response on behalf of the Opposition, and I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, which includes more than 30 years of business experience and interest in the property sector.

We support some of the principles, aims and ambitions of the Bill, some of which build on the work we undertook while we were in office—a time that included a record period for house building in this country. We will also highlight our concerns in a number of areas, including whether the Bill goes far enough to achieve its goals; the removal of a councillor's ability to vote on individual applications; and the potentially toxic mix of disproportionately large increases to housing targets in rural areas, the grey belt "Trojan horse", including the removal of any protection

for villages, the move to strategic plans and of course the ambition to build 1.5 million homes. The Secretary of State is apparently keen on spotting elephants, but she seems to have missed a huge one, in that that target of 1.5 million homes is completely undeliverable.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): In chapter 2, proposed new clause 12H(3) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 mentions the draft spatial development strategy and brings in a raft of changes, including consultation with representative bodies on “different racial, ethnic or national groups”

but also “different religious groups”. Is there a danger that we are pitting communities one against another? There is a legislative reason to do that, and I wanted to intervene to ask the Secretary of State about it, but can my hon. Friend, with his expertise, shine some light on why we are enshrining that provision into legislation?

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend is right to spot that requirement, and we will certainly be considering that when we table amendments to the Bill. We believe it is completely inappropriate that certain groups should get preference over other groups in consultations that might occur during the planning process.

The ambition to build 1.5 million homes is all well and good, but the Government have not yet set out exactly how they will do that. There are many questions about its deliverability, certainly in the context of the February S&P Global UK construction purchasing managers’ index, which described one of the biggest monthly falls in house building and construction on record. Indeed, the joint report from Savills, the Home Builders Federation and the National Housing Federation said that the Secretary of State would fall short of her target by 500,000 homes. The Government have not yet set out how many social or affordable homes they will deliver, or what measures they will put in place to help first-time buyers on to the housing ladder, particularly when they have scrapped Help to Buy and the stamp duty discounts, which helped 1 million young people to buy their first home.

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that housing targets mean little if the Government do not get a grip on immigration, which is causing massive demand for housing?

Kevin Hollinrake: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that point. The increase in this country’s population is part of the reason why we have a rising need for housing, as well as for temporary accommodation. That all impacts on the system.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): The hon. Member talked about missed targets, and about affordability. In 2010, the first of 16 housing Ministers under the previous Conservative Government boldly claimed, as did many of his successors, that the Government would improve affordability of housing overall. While they were in power, affordability, as measured by the ratio between median house prices and wages, reduced from 6.85 to 7.7. Can he explain that failure to the House?

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Gentleman fails to acknowledge that there were quite a few different housing Ministers during Labour’s previous tenure as well, but he makes an interesting and important point that I am

happy to answer. Of course we want to build more houses to tackle affordability problems. I say that in relation to social housing, because during those 14 years, as well as delivering 2.5 million new homes, we delivered 750,000 affordable homes.

Luke Murphy: The point I was making was about outcomes. The previous Government committed to improving affordability and abjectly failed to do so. Can the hon. Member explain why?

Kevin Hollinrake: As I said, there is no question but that there are underlying problems in the marketplace. We delivered 1 million homes, which was our target, in the last Parliament, but of course we agree that supply and demand is part of the equation. It is not the only part, so we support the ambition to deliver more homes. We had a similar commitment in our manifesto, and there is a context for that within the overall framework for a higher target.

The Government must reflect on the fact that although the construction sector is an important part of the economy, it represents only around 6% of GDP. Growth in the other 94% has been killed stone dead by the twin human wrecking balls who are the Chancellor and the Deputy Prime Minister. Having inherited the fastest growing economy in the G7, the Chancellor proceeded to trash talk the economy recklessly for six months, before hitting it with £70 billion per annum of tax and borrowing. If that was not bad enough, the Deputy Prime Minister introduced the Employment Rights Bill—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hooray!”] Wonderful. All Labour Members’ union supporters will applaud them for it. It will kill tens if not thousands of businesses, and potentially hundreds of thousands of jobs throughout our country.

Chris Curtis (Milton Keynes North) (Lab): We have already heard comments from Conservative Members about cases where planning permission has been granted, but nothing has been built. Almost every developer I have spoken to during this Parliament has said that that has one cause. It took so long to get planning permission—the Bill is designed to fix that—and while developers sought it, Liz Truss crashed the economy. Consequently, we had an inflation crisis and costs skyrocketed. Before the hon. Gentleman comments on our economic record, will he apologise for his?

Kevin Hollinrake: That is absolute nonsense.

Talking of confidence, according to a monthly survey by the Institute of Directors, business confidence in this country has collapsed since Labour took over. A high of plus 5 in July last year has collapsed to a covid-level low of minus 65. The Deputy Prime Minister’s Government inflicted that on this country.

There is a complete absence of business experience in the Cabinet. Having killed economic growth in most of the productive economy, the Government now resemble a clueless gambler at the end of a disastrous night in the casino—they are staking everything on a last-gasp gamble on the property market.

From 2013 to 2023, we saw the highest sustained level of new home formations in the past 50 years, surpassing even the levels in the 1970s. Since 2010, we have delivered 2.5 million new homes and 750,000 affordable homes.

Sir Gavin Williamson: Does my hon. Friend agree that the increase in stamp duty that has been imposed on people creates a real challenge when it comes to encouraging more people to buy homes? If the Deputy Prime Minister could encourage the Chancellor to reconsider that, so that it is not so expensive to buy a new home, that would be an important reform.

Kevin Hollinrake: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. What have the Deputy Prime Minister and the Chancellor got against first-time buyers? We helped 1 million first-time buyers to get on the housing ladder through Help to Buy and discounts on stamp duty. The Government scrapped both those schemes.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): Will the hon. Member reflect on the fact that although Help to Buy helped some people to purchase a new home, many others were priced out because of inflationary pressures and the exorbitant bonuses that were paid to the huge house building companies, which benefited the most from the scheme?

Kevin Hollinrake: I do not disagree that there were some flaws in the scheme. Nevertheless, around 340,000 people made it on to the housing ladder through that process. They include people in my constituency and probably people in the hon. Member's constituency.

We recognise the need to go further. That is why we commissioned work by Charles Banner KC on speeding up the planning and delivery of national infrastructure projects, and Nick Winser's review on accelerating energy infrastructure. We are grateful to them for their work. When we compare their recommendations and others with the Bill, we believe that the Bill's benefits have been significantly oversold. For example, on the infrastructure consenting process, measures to reduce decision times are welcome, but consideration should be given to removing specific critical projects, such as airports, reservoirs, nuclear power stations and national transport schemes from the judicial review process altogether. The nature restoration levy and environmental delivery plans to be delivered by Natural England could be welcome if they allow developers successfully to discharge the requirements of the habitats regulations, but there are key questions. What incentives are there for Natural England to set levies that are proportionate to the impact on the environment? Will they just become another tax and another deterrent to building?

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): The work done by the Conservative party on the NPPF was welcome, particularly in respect of its views on incorporating nature into the structure of the build, but it was unsuccessful. The hon. Gentleman will have heard my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister talk about a win-win for nature, so can he give the House an assurance that the Conservatives will back the implementation of measures such as swift bricks? Swifts are cavity-nesting birds that have no other place in this country and are declining at a great rate. Will he back the incorporation of those as a mandatory requirement in new builds?

Kevin Hollinrake: I can guarantee that we will support measures that we think will be successful. The hon. Gentleman brings up some of the work we tried to do in the previous Parliament, some of which was successful.

Other things were unsuccessful, including our solution on nutrient neutrality, which was blocked by his party by about 100 votes in the House of Lords. The impact of that particular measure is considered negligible. We want to ensure that where any levies are put in place by Natural England, if the impacts are considered negligible, they are also negligible for developers.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Con): I very much agree with what my hon. Friend is saying. Does he agree that more could be done to protect irreplaceable chalk stream habitats, particularly in the south of England? Does he also agree that one thing we could do is designate those chalk stream habitats to be irreplaceable and ensure that the Government specify clearly what permissions might be available there?

Kevin Hollinrake: We could talk with the Minister for Housing and Planning, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) about making such amendments to the legislation as it passes through Committee.

I have other questions. Is Natural England sufficiently resourced to carry out its work? How long will it be before these plans are in place? Have the Government taken into account the inevitable delays due to judicial reviews of the environmental delivery plans? Is it not the case that the habitats regulations remain in place beneath this new system, so if a development does not show the overall improvement test for each identified environmental feature, as referenced in clause 55, the system will not apply and the developer will still need to build those bat tunnels and fish discos? Indeed, Sam Richards of Britain Remade states that it might set the bar even higher by requiring a net gain for that species. If an EDP covers one element of environmental impact but not others, the developer might have to pay into the levy and build the bat tunnel.

Have the Government also considered changes to section 20 of the Environment Act 2021, which this legislation is subject to? I am interested to hear the Minister's reflections. Overall, we believe that it will take at least two to three years from Royal Assent for these EDPs to have meaningful effect. I am very happy to seek assurances from the Minister if that is not the case.

There are also understandable concerns about whether the route chosen will even deliver on its objective to protect the environment. The Chartered Institute of Ecology and Environmental Management has stated that the Government's approach means that our natural capital assets will be destroyed immediately, and it could take decades for any improvement.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): As my hon. Friend rightly pointed out, nature can be effectively compensated for only in certain circumstances, but landscape can never be replaced: once it is gone, it is gone. Does he think there should be scope in this Bill to recognise the special status of protected landscapes—what are now called national landscapes or national parks—to ensure that development in those areas is appropriate and does not permanently damage our precious landscape for future generations?

Kevin Hollinrake: My right hon. Friend raises a very important point. Constituencies such as his and mine that include those protected landscapes do not seem to have that considered or catered for in the housing targets, particularly the new ones that we have before us. Again, I am very keen to discuss with the Minister how we might address that.

On planning, we are very concerned about the national scheme of delegation, which will remove councillors' right to vote on individual planning applications. If the Secretary of State does not believe that that is the case, I suggest that she reads clause 46 of her own legislation. This is particularly extraordinary considering that when Labour was in opposition, the former shadow Housing Minister said in a debate in this House on 21 June 2021 that the previous Government should

“protect the right of communities to object to individual planning applications.”—[*Official Report*, 21 June 2021; Vol. 697, c. 620.]

Clearly, the current Housing Minister is not doing that—he is doing the exact opposite through these rules—and he should be clear with the public about that, because sooner or later, that fact will hit home.

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook) *indicated dissent.*

Kevin Hollinrake: I am very happy to have a debate with the Housing Minister—he is welcome to intervene on me. I suggest that he reads clause 46 as well. Of course, it is also a fact that 14 Cabinet Ministers, including the Deputy Prime Minister, the Home Secretary and the Health Secretary, all campaigned to block housing developments in their own constituencies. What hypocrisy!

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I have often found that the right of a councillor to insist that a matter goes to the planning committee, rather than be determined by officers, actually leads to the application going through where pettifogging officers would have refused it.

Kevin Hollinrake: It is right to say that the vast majority of applications are consented to by planning committees. Removing councillors' right to vote on them is absolutely the wrong thing to do, and Labour must be honest with the public that that is exactly what is happening.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): That raises a broader point. At the moment, councils in parts of the country such as my constituency are being abolished by this Government, so there will be no democratic accountability down the line, and there will be no democratic accountability at council level through planning committees, either. They are removing layer after layer of protection for local communities such as mine, with huge amounts of green-belt land suddenly redesignated as grey-belt land, despite recently being high-grade agricultural land. Can my hon. Friend understand the concerns in communities such as mine about what these proposals are doing? They want to see more housing, but not at the expense of London seeing a housing target—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. That was a very long intervention.

Kevin Hollinrake: I am concerned about the points that my right hon. Friend has raised. The Government talk about abolishing a layer of government, but they are actually introducing a new layer of government: the strategic authorities, which will have the ability to push housing from urban areas into rural areas such as my right hon. Friend's and those represented by other Members in this House.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Kevin Hollinrake: I will give way a final time, and then I will make some progress, if I can.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): On the environment, national parks are rightly protected, so when the Government impose housing targets on east Hampshire, all of that housing will have to go in the bits that are not part of the South Downs national park, increasing the housing pressures on what is essentially green-belt land but is not in the park. Would it not be better for this to be taken in its totality, and for the national park to be excluded from the figures?

Kevin Hollinrake: I agree that, in order to be fair to areas that include protected landscapes and national parks, that should be a consideration.

The removal of powers from councillors will only become apparent to many residents when they see a green notice on a nearby telegraph pole and contact their local councillor to express their concern, only to be told, “I’m sorry, but I no longer have the power to ask for the application to be considered and voted on by the planning committee.” The Local Government Association itself strongly opposes these changes, saying that

“The democratic role of councillors in decision-making is the backbone of the English planning system, and this should not be diminished.”

We also have concerns that the imposition of strategic planning will be used as a vehicle to force rural authorities to absorb urban housing need. This is of particular concern in many rural areas, given the disproportionately high increases in targets for rural locations. The Secretary of State has increased the national target for house building by 50%, so the average rural resident might expect that their local housing target has increased by a similar amount, but that is not the case. According to the House of Commons Library, the targets for major urban conurbations are up by 17% on average, while the targets in mainly rural areas have increased by 115%. For example, London's target is down by 12%, Newcastle's is down by 15%, Birmingham's is down by 38% and Coventry's is down by 55%, while Wyre Forest and New Forest's targets are up by 100% and Westmorland's is up by almost 500%.

Dr Luke Evans: Leicestershire is a prime example of where these things are happening. The target for Leicester city—where the infrastructure and plenty of brownfield sites are—is reducing by 31%, yet places such as Hinckley and Bosworth and North West Leicestershire are going up by 59% and 75% respectively. That sticks in the throats of people who want to see houses, when such areas are suffering. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is simply not right?

Kevin Hollinrake: It is totally unfair. In my view, it is cynical gerrymandering.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): On the exact same point, in Walsall our housing target is going up by a staggering 27%, while Birmingham is going down. With all the trash in Birmingham—thanks to the Labour council—perhaps people do not want to live there, but does my hon. Friend accept that it is not just the rural communities that have been affected, but those that are peripheral to the cities?

Kevin Hollinrake: My right hon. Friend is right to express her concerns. What everyone wants to see is fairness. We would expect everybody to carry a fair share of the extra housing, but that is not what is happening. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members should go and have a word with the House of Commons Library if they do not agree. They can check the numbers out.

The fact that housing delivery provided by new towns will not contribute to the targets will shock many councillors and local residents alike. Neighbourhood plans do not have to be consistent with the NPPF; they merely have to “have regard to” it. Can the Deputy Prime Minister confirm whether that will be changed? There is nothing in Labour’s plans about adequately resourcing or having process reforms of the Planning Inspectorate, which is clearly a key part of the system. Why has she scrapped all the work we did on design codes to move away from identikit housing towards building more beautifully?

We welcome the greater emphasis on local plans, but we would like to see more ambitious requirements for sites to be made available for small builders and for self-build. Currently, it is a 10% requirement on local authorities, but we would like to see a 20% allocation, as requested by the Federation of Master Builders. We would also like to see Homes England’s remit extended to include micro-builders.

Nesil Caliskan (Barking) (Lab): Does the shadow Minister recognise that, under the previous Government, communities were hindered in being able to shape proposed development by only a third of local authorities having up-to-date local plans?

Kevin Hollinrake: I agree with that, and I made the same point from the Back Benches on many occasions, including about Labour-run York, which has just put a local plan in place for the first time since 1956.

There are understandable concerns that compulsory purchase orders are an extension of the Government’s attacks on farmers. Tim Bonner of the Countryside Alliance said that

“giving councils more power to reduce the value of land is a step too far, especially in the context of...the inheritance tax fiasco.”

The Deputy Prime Minister and her colleagues should heed the words of National Farmers Union vice-president Rachel Hallos, who said:

“This Bill comes at a time when the UK farming industry is under immense financial pressure due to the loss of direct payments, extreme weather and the impacts of the family farm tax. So, farmers and landowners must be fully consulted every step of the way.”

Can the Deputy Prime Minister confirm whether that will be the case?

The grey belt, which was sold to the public as a few abandoned garage forecourts, has now been exposed as the Trojan horse we predicted it would be. Although not directly part of this Bill, it clearly interacts directly with it. It has been described as a death knell for the green belt due to the removal of parts of the definitions and protections of villages. Villages can now merge together or into nearby towns.

To conclude, we will not oppose the passage of the Bill this evening, but we will seek to amend it in ways that do not undermine the ambition to accelerate the delivery of new homes while ensuring that there are checks and balances that protect communities, rural areas, farmers and the environment and that deliver well-designed, affordable homes for everyone, not least those on lower incomes and first-time buyers.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. About 60 Members are seeking to get in, so after the Front-Bench speeches have been completed there will be a five-minute time limit.

5.29 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall and Bloxwich) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the shadow Secretary of State.

As we heard from the Secretary of State and Deputy Prime Minister, this is rightly an ambitious Bill, with 97 clauses and six schedules. I will focus on part 2, which deals with planning decisions, because it is important for our constituents and because in the past I undertook planning cases for the Treasury Solicitor’s Department, when our client, the Planning Inspectorate, was affectionately known as PINS—just the pins; no needles.

Careful thought needs to be given to the transparency of decisions. The Deputy Prime Minister mentioned consultation. Some local authorities count abstentions as a vote in favour while others do not, so will she consider introducing a standard process throughout the country? I hope that all decisions will be based on judicial review principles, whether they are made by a committee or by individual officers.

Clause 45 concerns training for local planning authorities. I know that there are committee members who, even after being given some training, would not know a material consideration if it hit them in the face. Given that some of the decisions may be controversial, our constituents need to be reassured that they can have confidence that the system is rules-based and features procedural fairness, adequacy of reasoning and no actual or apparent bias. Decisions must meet this test: would a fair-minded and informed observer, having considered the facts, conclude that there was a real possibility that the decision maker had taken into account relevant considerations, and had not taken into account irrelevant considerations?

Let me set out five important issues that apply to either a committee or a planning officer. First, if the decision is delegated to a planning officer, the officer should have undertaken a site visit and it should be recorded. Secondly, all votes in the committee should be recorded, which is not the case now. When we ask our constituents, “How did your councillor vote?”, they are often unable to say. Thirdly, fees are ringfenced under

clause 44, but documents should be available to members of the public. At present, people cannot see them all unless they are online; I had to look in three different places to find a highways report. There should still be a physical file that the public can consult. Fourthly, I hope that Ministers will consider term limits for the chair of planning.

Finally, there is the issue of transparency, which is one of the most important elements. There should be a proper procedure so that everyone, throughout the country, follows the same procedure and it is adhered to. I remember that just before the new NPPF, there was a decision involving a takeaway. The public health representatives said that there were no comments and the highways authority representatives said that there would be no impact and then changed their minds after speaking to the applicant. It is important for decisions to be transparent.

I welcome the strategic look at sites. Certain areas, such as mayoral districts with combined authorities, may be more convenient than others.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making a very thorough speech, and has raised some interesting points about the nature of the system and how to speed up decision-making. She has just mentioned sites. Does she agree that it is important for us to free up brownfield sites in towns and cities? There is a great deal of brownfield land in my area, and there have sometimes been lengthy delays in building it out. That has a real-life impact on young people who are trying to find a house of their own. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Government are right to tackle this serious problem?

Valerie Vaz: I absolutely agree; it is always “brownfield first”. I am about to say something about the green belt, but first I should make the important point that local people should not be shut out of any statutory consultation. They, and other statutory consultees, must be included in the process.

Green belt should be protected, although in some cases infill on the edges of villages and other areas is acceptable. However, I must add that Walsall does not want to be joined up to Birmingham.

Wendy Morton: There are many things that the right hon. Lady and I may disagree on but, when it comes to not wanting the Walsall borough joined up to Greater Birmingham, I think we both agree.

Valerie Vaz: I also want to raise the issue of buy to let. I hope the Deputy Prime Minister will speak to her colleagues in the Treasury about the fact that buy-to-let companies have become the largest single type of business in the UK. There are more companies set up to hold properties registered with Companies House than any other kind. Homes are for people to live in.

I ask those on the Front Bench to remember Walter Segal and Moran Scott, and the Segal method house that people built for themselves in the 1970s with the Lewisham Self Build Housing Association. They were pop-up timber houses. Pockets of land were found and people were empowered.

I know you are looking at me, Madam Deputy Speaker, so I will conclude. The planning system should not exclude the voices of our constituents, who will have to

live with the consequences of any development. Development should be for the common good and for future generations, taking into account the climate crisis. I know that the ministerial team are up to the task.

5.36 pm

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): The ability to have a home of their own has crept out of reach of a whole generation, while for others, decent emergency accommodation cannot be found; in the last five years, temporary accommodation was named as a contributing factor in the deaths of 58 children under one year old—babies. We urgently need to provide more homes that are genuinely affordable to local people.

That is why the Lib Dem council in Somerset is building hundreds of new council houses in parts of the county for the first time in a generation: 220 new council houses in north Taunton, in my constituency, and 100 additional council houses elsewhere, including zero-carbon council houses. Lib Dem councils in Kingston, Eastleigh, York, Portsmouth, Vale of White Horse, Westmorland and Furness, and Oadby and Wigston are building thousands more new homes.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): As a fellow Somerset MP, my hon. Friend will be aware that Somerset has had 18,000 homes stuck in a planning moratorium for nearly five years. While some of those have been unlocked, many are still in limbo. The Bill is meant to fix that impasse, but does he share my concern that the measures in the Bill may actually fail to unlock that housing, unless Natural England is given the resources it needs to monitor and enforce the nature restoration fund?

Gideon Amos: My hon. Friend and neighbour is absolutely right, and that is why the Liberal Democrats were the only party to put in our manifesto the funds needed for Natural England and the Environment Agency to address the challenges she rightly sets out.

Lib Dem councils are also granting planning permissions, thousands of them—in my county of Somerset alone, 13,000 homes have permission but remain unbuilt.

Luke Murphy: What impact does the hon. Gentleman think the 68% cut to the affordable housing budget under the coalition Government had on the delivery of affordable housing?

Gideon Amos: There was a significant increase in empty homes being brought back into use under the coalition policies promoted by the Liberal Democrat Ministers. If we look at the figures for the cuts the Government made between 2010 and 2024, we see that those cuts were far deeper after 2015, according to all Departments—the record will bear that out.

Luke Murphy: There was not a greater cut in the affordable homes budget at any point between 2010 and 2024; the largest cut—nearly 70%—was under the coalition Government.

Gideon Amos: I was referring to the departmental cuts. If we look at all Departments across Government, including Housing, Health and Education, the cuts were far deeper after 2015.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): I hesitate to try to help the hon. Gentleman with his answer, but might it be that the coalition Government were having difficulty building affordable houses in that period because the former Labour Chief Secretary to the Treasury had said there was no money left?

Gideon Amos: The hon. Gentleman is right to remind us of the letter left by the outgoing Labour Government for the incoming coalition.

We do need to tackle blockages in the system, and if those 13,000 homes in Somerset that have permission and are not being built were being built, we would already have eliminated the 10,000-plus housing waiting list in the county.

Luke Taylor: My hon. Friend is being very generous with his time. He is talking about planning permission being granted, but the homes not being built. In Sutton in 2023, I was a member of the planning committee that gave permission for the Victoria House site, which has lain dormant ever since. Permission was given for 74 homes, but they are not being built. It is a frustration for me every time I cycle past to see that potential not being realised. Does he agree that giving councils the power to take over sites that have permission but are not being built would be a really important part of delivering the homes that we need?

Gideon Amos: It is almost as though my hon. Friend had read a further section of my speech. That is exactly what we need to do in this country to unlock some of those sites.

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Gideon Amos: I will make a little progress, but maybe later.

Paul Holmes: Oh, come on—I was going to be nice to you!

Gideon Amos: We shall put that to the test later.

We welcome the provisions that allow compulsory acquisition—where there is a compelling case in the public interest, such as to build social housing—to go ahead on the basis of existing use value, not what the owner hopes will be the value in the future, to the detriment of the public purse. That could make a big difference. It would allow councils to assemble land more affordably, and to deliver more social homes. However, councils need to be resourced to carry out such projects. To that end, I am delighted that the proposal to abolish the cap on planning application fees that my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) brought forward in her Bill in 2023 is included in this Bill.

Chris Curtis: Would the hon. Member like to take this moment to congratulate the absolute heroes in his party who forced it to change its policy at conference last year in favour of building homes? Many of those who sit on the Benches alongside him were calling out the members of his party for trying to get it to do so, one of whom, a former leader, called them Thatcherite. Does he agree with me that building new homes is not Thatcherite, but is the pro-development future that this country needs and that this Chamber should be supporting?

Gideon Amos: If the hon. Gentleman is so interested in our debates, he should please come and join our next party conference. We would be delighted to debate whether our targets should be 150,000 social rent homes per year or 300,000 general needs homes per year. Of course, we need both, and that was the conclusion of our very thoughtful and timely conference debate.

I congratulate the Minister for Housing and Planning and the Secretary of State—the Deputy Prime Minister—on lifting that cap, on bringing strategic planning into the Bill and on the changes to national policy statements. I also congratulate them on the new nature restoration fund, where it provides support in relation to issues such as nutrient neutrality. As was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke), that is holding back thousands of homes in Somerset, and we welcome the change.

Friends of the Earth has welcomed the nature restoration fund, but points out that it is very unclear how the nature restoration levy will work alongside other regimes. In that respect and many others, the Bill is short on the key principles. It is big on powers for the Secretary of State, but short on how those powers will be exercised. The Bill does not just lack details; it lacks some really big and important principles, including how that will work with other regimes. The funding of the nature restoration levy needs to be up front, so that nature restoration work begins straightaway.

We ask the Minister and the Government to enshrine in the Bill the principle that, on each site, development should first not do harm. That principle needs to be guaranteed its place at the top of the hierarchy of mitigation when it comes to protecting our environment.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: On the point about not doing any harm to nature, would the hon. Member's party support the water companies becoming statutory consultees so that we can ensure that, with any new housing, not a litre of extra sewage goes into our rivers?

Gideon Amos: We would support that, as we did in a Westminster Hall debate very recently. We should be hearing such voices in the planning system, not shutting them out of the planning system.

On energy infrastructure, we welcome support for battery storage and improving access to the grid. Transmission connections are a huge source of delay—one of the biggest bottlenecks for renewable energy. But if we are to unblock that infrastructure, we need to go much further. All large-scale infrastructure projects, not just electricity transmission, should give people direct community benefit. Whether wind farm, solar farm, battery array or gas-fired power station, those living nearby should benefit through local investment or lower bills.

We also support the ambition to streamline planning for major projects, with exceptions on taking category 3 people out of compulsory purchase consultations. Let us note again who the real blockers were on these really big projects. They were not the people. It was nothing to do with local communities or the planning profession—I declare an interest as a member of the planning profession—and it was not councils. It was Ministers who left decisions lying on their desks, wrecking the

timescales scrupulously followed by other parties in the process, so let us not blame people for politicians' failures.

There are things to welcome in the Bill, but it hits the wrong target in many important areas, and this is where I must raise some more serious concerns. The detail provided in the changes to national infrastructure projects is good, but it is in real contrast to other areas of the Bill. There are many Henry VIII clauses that give sweeping powers to the Secretary of State and a democratic deficit is becoming a serious concern. For all that we welcome the aim to deliver homes, the Bill takes aim at communities, when we should be encouraging and empowering them to deliver and create the homes and places we want to see. I say again that racking up permissions—we already have a staggering 1.5 million homes without permission—will not ensure a single one gets built. We need to tackle the failure to build out of permissions granted by taking back the land or further limiting the lifetime of permissions. “Use it or lose it” needs to be the message.

Unless we deal with the supply chain issues and the lack of skills, we will have even more blockers on development.

Dan Tomlinson (Chipping Barnet) (Lab): How does the hon. Gentleman square his support for getting more homes built and helping children who are living in temporary accommodation with his opposition to 250 new homes in his constituency, which he announced online just this month?

Gideon Amos: I am absolutely delighted to be supporting thousands of new homes across my constituency. The population of my constituency has gone up almost 10% over the past 10 years and I have supported thousands of those new homes, as have my Liberal Democrat colleagues on the planning committee who voted through all those permissions. If occasionally a smaller development in the hon. Gentleman's constituency is not right, I would expect him to oppose it, just as I would in my constituency. I believe Members across the House have done so.

By giving more powers to communities, a community-led approach could actually increase supply. It is time, for example, to give councils the power to end Right to Buy in their areas. They cannot fill the bath, in terms of providing council houses and social homes, if the plug is taken out and they are forced to sell them off as they have done over the preceding decades. Through proper planning, we also want communities in control of how many holiday lets are allowed in their area, so that homes are not swallowed up that could otherwise increase the supply of affordable housing. That is not in the Bill and should be.

Mandating renewable energy such as solar panels on roofs, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) articulately argued for, would put people and local communities in control of the bills coming from their pockets.

Growing our economy, sustaining nature and building new homes are not mutually exclusive. They can work together. There are so many examples of how they can work together. For example, decent gardens have more biodiversity than many rural areas. Community-led decisions very often bring the best results, with residents'

infrastructure needs addressed and development shaped around green spaces and sustainability. To unblock homes, the Government need to do two key things instead of taking aim at ordinary people: first, unlock the infrastructure we need, including GPs, transport, green spaces, green infrastructure and water connections; and, secondly, fund the social homes that have been so sorely lacking. Since social housing disappeared as a meaningful proportion of housing supply and social housing targets fell away, this country has never been able to keep pace with demand. Our target is 150,000 per year. I hope the Government will provide a target of their own for social homes; so far, nothing has been said on that either. Invest in those two things, as history has taught us, and the number of homes we could provide would be almost unlimited.

Meanwhile, in communities like my own—where the 2,000-home Orchard Grove development in the west of Taunton, which I support, is taking shape—the reality is that while many people want to see new GP surgeries, developments are held back by the fact that we often cannot get GPs to staff the surgeries where they are being built.

We want to see a Bill about communities leading in planning and development. Instead, the Bill is part of a growing trend that is taking powers away from local communities. It takes a big step in that direction by allowing the Secretary of State to override planning committees and enabling national schemes of delegation that allow Whitehall to dictate who makes decisions on a local council—another Henry VIII clause, giving Whitehall unlimited power to rewrite the standing orders and constitutions of councils up and down the country. That cannot possibly sit right with anybody who values our proud tradition of local government that is independent of central Government. Consultation is sidelined elsewhere, too. Sport England will no longer have a voice to protect playing fields, and people subject to compulsory purchase orders will no longer have the voice they had before.

If the Government believe that local is the problem and that planning committees are the blocker, let us take a quick look at the actual figures. Councils approve more than 85% of planning applications, with some studies putting that figure even higher—closer to 90%. Councillors of all parties are not blocking development; they are enabling 90% of permissions to go through.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the emphasis in the Bill on removing the powers of planning committees will, by default, lead the public to believe that planning committees throughout the years have actually been the problem? In reality, many planning committees have done their mandatory training and made the right decisions, and those decisions have been upheld by the Planning Inspectorate time and again. It should be put on the record for the public that planning committees, as a whole, are not the problem. There is a huge range of issues that we might need to deal with, but that is not one.

Gideon Amos: I come back to what the LGA said: the role councillors play in the planning system is the backbone of that system. That is the way it should remain. Taking decisions out of councillors' hands is taking decisions out of the hands of local people.

[Gideon Amos]

Developing and shaping towns or neighbourhoods without the input of the councillors who have that level of trust and local knowledge will make those neighbourhoods and developments poorer and even more likely to fail. Frankly, removing people and their councillors from the system does not mean faster planning, but less democratic planning. It will mean that people are shut out and make them lose faith in the system even more; it will mean more legal challenges and more people who feel shut out from the system. The Bill risks making development not only slower, but worse.

There is, of course, another way. Instead of a Bill that shuts people out and shuts them up, silencing voices and failing people on the basic services and infrastructure their communities need, we should look to the great community-led developments of the past, and more recently, from Letchworth and Welwyn Garden Cities and Hampstead Garden Suburb, to local authority-led new towns such as Milton Keynes, right up to the award-winning schemes often built in partnership with the public and private sector up and down the country right now—developments where nature, people and the economy grow together, not in opposition to each other, as we see in the best places that we all know and enjoy visiting.

If we build with the economy and with those who want growth, and for nature by developing with nature and for people by developing with people, we will build the homes, jobs and services that our communities want to see, that our country deserves and that our environment and our planet so desperately need.

5.53 pm

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): The origin of Britain's planning system is as deeply rooted in the legacy of the post-war Labour Government as that of the national health service and the welfare state. Like those great Labour institutions, it has faced relentless underfunding, attacks and dismantling from the Conservatives, who prioritise the rights of wealthy landowners over the entitlement of working people to affordable housing and quality infrastructure.

I commend the Government for bringing forward a Bill that offers the opportunity to at last get to grips with the appalling mess made of the planning system by the parties opposite; after all, it was they who allowed more than 14,000 hectares of our best farmland to be lost to development since 2010. The reality is that while we now have substantially more homes per capita than 50 years ago—a surplus that has grown rapidly in recent years—house prices in the UK have risen by 3,878% since 1971. Whatever may be said by their lobbyists, the housing crisis is not a straightforward issue of supply, and it will not be solved by simply putting more powers in the hands of profiteering developers. Waiting for a market solution to this societal emergency would be an exercise in utterly extravagant futility.

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): For the past 30 years, successive Governments have attempted to deliver affordable housing through the private sector, and they have failed. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is time for a publicly funded council house building programme?

Chris Hinchliff: I completely agree.

The Government need to deliver a coherent vision for development in this country that matches the clarity and boldness of Labour's 1947 vision, putting democratic control and social justice back at the heart of the planning system.

First, we must contend with the fact that more than 1.2 million homes that were granted planning permission since 2015 have not been built. Rather than waiting for developers to drip feed land into the system at their convenience, keeping prices high and profits maximised, we must introduce firm financial penalties for land banking to spur on construction and dampen price inflation.

Secondly, in towns like Buntingford and Royston, although thousands of houses have been built in recent years, local people remain stuck on sky-high waiting lists, with enormous knock-on costs for those families and our wider communities. We must therefore address not just the aggregate quantity of building but the types of homes we are providing with a new era of council housing, especially in our small towns and villages.

The housing crisis is also about the concentration of land ownership in the hands of the super-rich. Half of England is owned by less than 1% of its population. Between 1995 and 2022, land values rose by more than 600% to £7.2 trillion, now representing more than 60% of the UK's total net worth. I welcome the Bill's expansion of powers for local authorities to prevent developers cashing in on inflated land prices at the cost of the taxpayer. We must maximise the public capture of land value uplifts to provide the necessary funding for genuinely affordable homes that are linked to local incomes and based in well-designed communities that benefit from easy access to all the facilities we need in our daily lives.

Simultaneously, the Government must also grasp this opportunity to reshape how councils develop local plans. Empowered councils with well-resourced planning departments should be able to take an active role to assess the needs of local families, identify appropriate sites and proactively use compulsory purchase orders for genuinely strategic land assembly to meet the needs of their communities.

Finally, given the collapse of nature in our country, we must use this legislation to recognise the very real environmental limits on growth. It is high time our planning system ensured that a presumption in favour of sustainable development ceases to act as a presumption in favour of any development whatsoever.

I look forward to working with Ministers to advance this legislation and secure the strongest possible Bill, which restores our role as custodians of the countryside, compels the private sector to deliver and places the power to meet our housing and infrastructure needs firmly back in democratic hands.

5.58 pm

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): South Leicestershire is a mid-sized constituency measuring 15 miles by 10 miles, and it already has some of the largest-scale developments in any part of our country. We have the second of the new Titan prisons, which was recently completed; one of the largest holes in the UK at Croft quarry; Bruntingthorpe aerodrome, which currently houses one of the largest UK car auction sites, with

25,000 cars coming in and out at any point; the 4,000-home development at New Lubbesthorpe; and the prospect of a new garden village at Whetstone Pastures. We are surrounded by logistics parks; in fact, we are home to one of Europe's largest logistics parks—currently doubling in size—Magna Park. At what point can we say that we are doing a reasonable fair share for our county, region and country?

There are no nimbys in South Leicestershire; we generally support appropriate development. I generally support the objectives in the Bill, but there are one or two areas I would like to raise, one being the highly controversial proposed development known as Lutterworth East. I know that the Secretary of State and her team cannot refer to specific cases and that this matter is currently the subject of a call-in, but she and her team rightly say that new housing developments, particularly large ones, must have appropriate numbers of social housing and affordable housing.

The local plan approved by Harborough district council and the Planning Inspectorate made clear that 40% of the homes in large-scale housing developments in my constituency must be affordable. In addition, the Lutterworth East proposal promised the people of Lutterworth that there would be no expansion of strategic warehousing as part of Lutterworth East on the basis that Magna Park—one of Europe's largest logistics parks—is currently doubling in size.

The problem that we have is not nimbys or a lack of building. It is that the local plan for South Leicestershire and Harborough is being completely ignored by developers. In this case, the oddity is that the developer is Leicestershire county council. Only last December it disgracefully applied to substantially vary the planning permission it was given in 2020 for Lutterworth East. It was granted a reduction from 40% affordable housing in Lutterworth East to 10%. That cannot be in line with the comments the new Government have stated many times about the need for social housing and affordable housing. It flies in the face of everything that the Secretary of State and her team are saying, including what has been said today at the Dispatch Box.

I do not expect a response from the Secretary of State today, but I put on record my request that, if she is serious about wanting more affordable housing in large-scale housing projects, the call-in should be granted. If the call-in is granted, Lutterworth East will be restored to an appropriate housing development of just under 3,000 homes, of which 40% will be affordable. If the Secretary of State does not agree with the call-in, I am afraid she cannot stand at that Dispatch Box and claim that the new Government want to see higher levels of affordable housing, because what the developer is doing in this case is saying no to affordable housing.

I conclude by stating my general support for the Secretary of State and her team's objective of more homes. South Leicestershire is doing its part, but I put on record again that if she is serious about the numbers of social housing and affordable homes that need to be built, that call-in must be granted.

6.3 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I welcome the Bill. When I studied for my planning diploma, I learned that since the Town and Country

Planning Act 1947, the power of national strategic policy versus the challenge of local politics in planning approvals has waxed and waned. It felt under the previous Government as though national powers over significant development decisions almost disappeared, and MPs of the Government party effectively pressured the then Secretary of State to refuse much-needed infrastructure developments that included new housing developments, prisons and more. There has to be a balance. The national Government have to be able to deliver on their national strategies. This is what the Bill does.

I particularly welcome specific parts of the Bill. It fosters more certainty for critical national infrastructure such as electricity—that is so important, as we heard earlier in the Heathrow statement—clean energy, roads, public transport, water and sewerage. I welcome the certainty of decision making for planning applications, more effective land assembly through improving the compulsory purchase orders process and bringing back development corporations, and the return of effective spatial development strategies. The Bill will enable the Government to reform the planning system to deliver on growth, new housing, cutting carbon emissions and climate change resilience—all of which the UK badly needs.

As an MP in London where buying a home or even renting is out of reach to most young people, I welcome the Government's focus on delivering the 1.5 million new homes that are needed. The Bill and the excellent national planning policy framework enable new housing developments to no longer be designed with entrenched car dependence. The Bill is an excellent opportunity to ensure that new housing and other developments can be concentrated in locations with good public transport, so that schools, shops, health centres, parks and open spaces are easily reachable without the need to drive. This ensures access for all, not only those who have a car. It ensures access to jobs, education, training and shops—all essential building blocks for growth across the country.

Munira Wilson: My constituency neighbour is making a strong speech. I agree with her about building homes in areas that are accessible by public transport. Does she agree that the Government should be encouraged to ensure that where the public sector is selling off land and buildings—disused police stations, fire stations or other public sector buildings—it should be allowed to sell below market value, and should be encouraged to do so to enable more affordable housing and social housing in constituencies like mine and hers, where there just is not the land to build on?

Ruth Cadbury: My constituency neighbour makes a good point, but she must remember that due to 15 years of austerity, many of those sales were the only way that public sector institutions could deliver the new services that were so badly needed.

The Mayor of London and councils such as Hounslow are working with the Labour Government on several key transport links, including the west London orbital, which will unlock thousands of new homes. However, the Bill alone will not unlock the housing and infrastructure projects that the country so urgently needs, so I ask the Secretary of State—or the Minister for Housing and Planning, who is still present—to address the other causes of delay and uncertainty that we are seeing in the system.

[*Ruth Cadbury*]

The community infrastructure levy and section 106 agreements on, say, new bus routes, must be adequate, timely and sustainable, so that people are not moving into estates to then become dependent on having a car. Providing two buses a day for a couple of years, some time after tens or even hundreds of homes have been occupied, is not building in sustainable transport.

My second point is about new joint public-private developments. The hybrid Bill process, as was used for High Speed 2, took years and still did not deliver detailed plans for the routes. It then got mired in lengthy legal processes over the details. The chairman of the National Infrastructure Commission told our Transport Committee how France and Spain delivered new high-speed rail in a fraction of the time, without it being mired in public opposition and legal challenges. It has taken far too long to deliver even half of the original HS2 project. I therefore hope that the Government will come up with a more streamlined process for such major national projects.

Thirdly, I hope that the Secretary of State will work with the Chancellor on different public-private funding mechanisms that other equivalent economies have long used to develop transport infrastructure, social and affordable housing and other public services, so that they are no longer held back due to historic Treasury orthodoxies on capital expenditure.

Fourthly, the Housing Minister will be aware of the additional delays faced by developers of tall blocks of flats. They have planning permission but are being delayed in gateways 2 and 3 of the Building Safety Act 2022. The legislation itself may not be the problem, but the building safety regulator processes certainly are. A development of more than 400 homes in my constituency has been stuck for over a year, with no certainty about if and when they will go ahead. Obviously, my last three points are not within the scope of the Bill, but they are relevant to the aspirations of this Labour Government to get Britain building, which the Bill will deliver.

6.10 pm

Alex Brewer (North East Hampshire) (LD): There is no doubt that we need new homes, but it is abundantly clear from my casework and from doorstep conversations in North East Hampshire—and I am sure in many other places—that the effects of a warming planet and many years of neglected infrastructure are wreaking havoc on our communities. In order to stop the damage, we must look after nature as we build, and ensure a well-thought-out approach to our public services, to integrate new homes and their local environments effectively.

It is frustrating to say the least to see Labour removing the space for local decision making and consent. Local people know their area. In North East Hampshire, chalk streams are close to our hearts but far too close to our sewage outlets. There are only around 200 chalk streams left in the world, and two of them are in my constituency. These remarkable, irreplaceable habitats are home to iconic species including otter, kingfisher and salmon. Despite that, they have not been protected—last year alone, chalk streams endured 14,000 hours of sewage discharges. Chalk streams are under threat not just from sewage but from irresponsible developments that promise protection and abandon those promises after planning permission is granted.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I strongly support what the hon. Lady is saying, and any specific protection for chalk streams. Does she feel that the Bill goes far enough on that, or is specific legislation needed to preserve these beautiful, almost unique things that we have in this country?

Alex Brewer: The right hon. Member has anticipated my next point. To ensure that development is approached effectively and sustainably, there must be legislation to protect chalk streams. The Government should use the Bill to expand the list of irreplaceable habitats that are severely threatened and include chalk streams in it. Mitigation schemes will not help these unique habitats. They need protection. Unbelievably, this is the second Bill in six months that the Government could have used to protect our precious chalk streams, as the Water (Special Measures) Bill also failed to mention them specifically.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): Like my hon. Friend, I have two chalk streams in my constituency. Does she agree that making water companies statutory consultees in any future developments will ensure provision of the infrastructure that is required, so that no more pollution goes into our chalk streams?

Alex Brewer: I completely agree. The Government should be more ambitious in the Bill to ensure that building regulations mandate nature-friendly developments to provide sustainable and healthy housing.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I agree that Britain is among the most nature-depleted countries in all of Europe. Does the hon. Member agree with Greenpeace, the Green Alliance and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds that if development is done hand in hand with nature, both can thrive, and that the Bill achieves that?

Alex Brewer: I agree that nature and building should go hand in hand, and I hope that the Bill will start to achieve that. Good green and sustainable design works for everyone concerned. Sufficient insulation in homes prevents heat loss and reduces bills and carbon emissions. Solar energy production and proper flood protections are other obvious examples where investment up front pays dividends down the line. A great example in North East Hampshire is Hart district council offices. Since the installation of solar panels on the roof, a phenomenal 57,000 kWh of electricity has been generated each year. Imagine if we put solar panels on every new house that was built.

Major issues such as flooding and drainage plague many areas up and down the country. In my constituency, Hartley Wintney high street, Hook and the surrounding areas are frequently flooded because of blocked drains, as surface water cannot drain away effectively after heavy rainfall. Hartley Wintney fire station even had to raise all its electrical sockets higher up the wall because the flooding has been so frequent. Our local businesses are struggling to get sufficient insurance. The Bill should include a binding commitment to the land use framework, which would help to determine where more permanent land use change can occur, to find the optimum balance between food production and ecosystem services such as flood risk management, climate mitigation and biodiversity.

I come again to the question of new houses. We need them and we need them fast, but this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to ensure that our new homes are properly fit for the future. They must be built in the right place, with the right infrastructure and with proper consideration for our food security, biodiversity and carbon footprint. Communities do not mind new homes, but people also want GP appointments, NHS dentists, rural bus services and to be able to drive down roads with no potholes. There is an opportunity to be ambitious here, and it is being missed. I urge the Government to be bolder and to strive for planning that is as committed to the environment, to integrated infrastructure and to our local communities as it is to housing.

6.16 pm

Chris Curtis (Milton Keynes North) (Lab): I thank the people across Government and from the Department who have worked so hard to pull this Bill together quite quickly. I also thank the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) for the first shout out to Milton Keynes in the debate. Hon. Members may be about to hear many more.

In politics we all like to talk about our own stories and how they have impacted us. I have sat on these Benches and heard the Education Secretary talk about how her education has helped her in life, and the Health Secretary talk about how his interactions with the NHS during his cancer diagnosis drive him to fix our health service. What is important to my life—I believe this is true of most young people's lives—is having a decent home surrounded by a decent community.

Milton Keynes, my home town, was founded the last time an Act of Parliament was passed to make this country build 300,000 homes a year. Its pioneers pushed hard to get the place built, which meant that my parents were able to bring up my brother and me in a spacious home with our own back garden, giving us the security and stability needed for the best start in life. It meant that I could play safely in green spaces, I had access to excellent local amenities and my family could live affordably with a good quality of life. That is the kind of opportunity that every child in Britain deserves, so it is great to see legislation that will finally begin to remove the barriers to building the new homes that this country so desperately needs.

With the changes to development corporations and CPOs, we may also see the new towns that this country so desperately needs. The proposals for planning committees will play a key role in ensuring that much-needed developments do not get stuck in unnecessary bureaucracy and political gridlock.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that local people will still have a role in developing local plans and in many of the more complicated planning applications? Some of what we have heard today around local input has been scaremongering.

Chris Curtis: That is true. Certainty is incredibly important to enable the housing sector to invest in the skills, development and modern methods of construction that will enable us to alleviate the country's housing crisis.

Beyond housing, we must recognise that our failure to build vital infrastructure in Britain is leaving our country vulnerable. Our energy security—the foundation

of our national security—depends on having infrastructure to support a modern, productive economy. We have failed to build the transport links that are needed to get goods and people moving efficiently. We have failed to build the energy infrastructure that is needed to reduce our dependence on volatile foreign oil and gas, and we have not built a single reservoir in decades, meaning that we lack the water security that is required in the face of climate change.

Paul Holmes: Labour Members keep using the suggestion that reservoirs have not been built in recent times as an example of why the Government are proceeding with the Bill. However, under current guidelines and legislation, a reservoir is being built down the road in my constituency, so it is not a great example to use, is it?

Chris Curtis: I note the length of time that that reservoir has taken to be built. It would be nice if someone on the Conservative Benches started by acknowledging their Government's lack of ability to build the infrastructure that this country so desperately needed for decades. The barriers that they constantly put in the way of building it are one reason why we are in this situation.

Our national security is only ever as strong as our economic security. Sure, we should be investing in defence, but we can do so only if we have a strong economy. One of the biggest reasons why we have not had a growing economy or economic security is because it has become too difficult to build in Britain. I am proud to support a Bill that will get Britain building again.

I will talk briefly about the nature restoration fund, which in principle is a policy masterstroke. What is most shameful about our current nature legislation set-up, including the habitats regulations, is not just that it stops us from building the homes and infrastructure that our country needs and that it damages our economy in the meantime, but that it does not even work on its own terms. As was mentioned earlier, Britain is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world; I am told that it is second only to Singapore. Why is that? Because the money that we force builders to pay for nature projects is not being spent in the most efficient way.

Take for example, as my hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Dan Tomlinson) pointed out, the infamous bat tunnel, which cost us more than £120 million to protect a tiny proportion of bats, all while critical infrastructure projects were delayed or cancelled. Imagine what we could have done for nature not just with that money, but with the extra money that would have been provided to our economy by not stalling that project for so long. Although the nature restoration fund is a welcome step forward, we must ensure that it works. It is heavily reliant on Natural England bringing forward workable delivery plans in a timely fashion.

Nesil Caliskan (Barking) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that open green spaces are not always the most biodiverse, and that we need a more joined-up approach to providing investment in those spaces?

Chris Curtis: I agree, and I hope that the nature restoration fund can be an opportunity to make those spaces more biodiverse. I am trying to support a wetlands art project in my constituency that would use such

[Chris Curtis]

money to improve biodiversity. I hope that all the organisations that, like me, care about nature recovery will do the right thing and support these changes—they will be the best thing for nature in decades—rather than trying to defend an indefensible status quo.

Finally, as somebody who owes much of my fantastic upbringing to a development corporation, I turn to the crucial issue of how we will fund development corporations when we start building the new towns. Although the changes introduced by the Bill are promising, at some point we will need to think about that financing. For every pound that was invested in Milton Keynes, many more were given back to the Treasury—somebody said the ratio was 14:1, but I have not found a source for that. Currently, any debt issues by development corporations to private capital must be added to the Government's balance sheet. However, a simple change to Treasury accounting, to count those corporations in the same way as the banks that fell into public ownership after the financial crash, could unlock huge sums of international private capital to fund these vital homes and projects. That approach is consistent with those taken by many European counterparts, and we should actively explore it as a priority.

I will support the Bill today, but I urge Ministers to be honest that this is not a moment for self-congratulation. We need to continue to go further and faster to build the homes and the infrastructure that this country so desperately needs.

6.23 pm

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): To pick up the comments made by the hon. Member for Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis) on reservoirs, I also have a reservoir proposed for my constituency. I noted that the Secretary of State refused to be drawn on specific schemes, including when challenged by her own Front Bench. Perhaps the Minister can tell us in winding up how much more quickly a typical reservoir will be constructed as a result of this Bill and what the percentage of savings will be from that. That sort of detail is currently lacking from claims such as those made by the hon. Member. [Interruption.] I note the Minister's wry smile.

Let me start by picking up what the Government said last week and what they are saying this week. Last week, they said that they were scrapping a big quango, NHS England, because they wanted to ensure more democratic oversight, yet this week they are giving huge new powers to another quango, Natural England, so that they can seize land at below market value with little democratic oversight. Indeed, the hon. Member just mentioned the bat tunnel. It is a strange paradox to criticise that while supporting giving Natural England more powers to make similar decisions.

There is not just a lack of consistency, but a lack of co-ordination across Government. The Government are currently consulting on the land use framework—the consultation is open and does not close until 25 April—but Ministers seem to be ignoring that. The Secretary of State talked in her opening remarks about the Bill unlocking land for nature and energy schemes, so we have one part of the Government consulting on the land use strategy while another part is legislating to seize land that is in

the scope of that ongoing consultation to use for its schemes. It would be helpful if the Minister told us why he is ignoring the consultation that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is conducting. Perhaps we will just have a slew of Government amendments.

If the new powers for Natural England are indeed necessary, that suggests that a significant amount of land will be taken for nature restoration schemes. We know from the land use strategy that about 12,000 farms will be lost over a generation. Either the power is needed—in that case, what is the impact of clause 72 on farmland and farm security?—or not much land will be taken as a result, in which case why do we need this power now?

In the shadow Secretary of State's opening remarks, he pointed to the number of Cabinet Ministers who have objected to development schemes in their own constituencies. That is a challenge that we all face, as Members of Parliament, when constituents raise concerns. Certainly, my experience of dealing with Natural England—not least as Secretary of State for DEFRA—was that once things were in primary legislation, it would often take a gold-plated interpretation. It may just be that Ministers are being bold, but it would be helpful to understand why they think that granting further powers to seize land will not weaken democratic control. When the Secretary of State was challenged on that, she said that the democratic controls were being maintained but streamlined. I do not think that is how Natural England will interpret it.

Let me give the House a practical example. In the David Fursdon review of Dartmoor, there was conflict in interpretation regarding sites of special scientific interest between Natural England and farmers who had farmed the common for many years. There was huge tension, which David Fursdon skilfully managed to resolve, but that will not happen if the powers in the Bill are enacted.

Finally, there is a paradox. The people we need on side to support nature restoration are the farmers, who are the ones who care most about nature. The Bill is a missed opportunity on things like incinerators, as it will make it easier to get planning permission to burn plastic, which is damaging for the environment and damaging for nature. And yet the farmers, who are the people we need on side, will have their land confiscated by an undemocratic quango that is being given more control, and there is nothing in the Bill to address that. Given the shortage of time, it would be helpful if, in closing, the Minister could clarify some of those points.

6.28 pm

Nesil Caliskan (Barking) (Lab): I declare an interest as the vice-president of the Local Government Association. I support the Bill because we must do everything we can to deliver the building of more housing in this country. As the Member for Barking, I see and hear at first hand the impact of the housing crisis. Every week, I meet constituents who share their personal and desperate housing stories. To fix the housing crisis, we require political will alongside national initiatives and investment from the Government, but we must also change the policy foundations, because the national planning system is not fit for purpose.

As a former London council leader who delivered a local plan that designated land for 30,000 new homes, I know only too well that the existing planning frameworks frustrate house building and that the voices of those opposing new homes—often individuals who already own their own home—are prioritised. The truth is that our planning system relies too much on the political bravery of local councillors. Local plans for new homes are stopped by a vocal minority in too many cases. This creates a national patchwork of house building, and the planning systems are used to slow down decision making in the hope that the applicant will eventually just give up.

I welcome the fact that, through the Bill, the Government will create a national scheme of delegation. This will allow planning professionals to work more effectively, ensuring consistency across the country. Allowing planning authorities the flexibility to set their own fees and recover costs is an important step, but given that there is a £360 million deficit nationally, will the Minister reassure us all that the councils will be held responsible for ringfencing that income in their planning departments so that local authorities can improve their performance?

Transport and infrastructure form a crucial component in unlocking the potential for house building, because both private and public sector developments need clear business cases to build. Strong business cases rely on land value, which is boosted by infrastructure, including but not exclusively transport connectivity. The measures in the Bill to streamline the process for agreeing nationally important infrastructure are therefore welcome, but I would like the Government to consider whether the Bill goes far enough.

The HS2 bat tunnels are frequently mentioned in this Chamber, but there are other examples, including the Lower Thames crossing, which has been delayed for over three decades. It has become the UK's biggest ever planning application, with over 2,000 pages and costing £800 million in planning costs. Taking applications through the national significant infrastructure projects process—a mouthful to say—is too costly and takes far too long. A large part of the problem are the statutory pre-application consultation requirements. This means that all the parties involved operate in a hyper-risk-averse manner, focusing on endless negotiations. That serves the taxpayer and our communities in no way, so I encourage my hon. Friend the Minister to look again specifically at reforming the pre-application process to reduce delays and get essential infrastructure consented faster.

Paul Holmes: The hon. Lady rightly talks about ambition and ensuring that we get planning applications delivered quickly. Does she think that the 56% reduction and the 1,694 fewer homes that her local Labour council will have to deliver will speed up the length of time it will take for them to get through?

Nesil Caliskan: The hon. Gentleman gives me an opportunity to highlight the fact that my local authority has been building homes far faster than most local authorities across the country. The general slowing in the delivery of housing over the past two years is absolutely to do with the fact that the previous Government crashed the economy and that interest rates and inflation went through the roof. I have yet to come across a developer or local authority that does not say that all its pipeline was impacted by the economic crisis.

Paul Holmes: The hon. Lady is correct to say that there were some issues with housing supply during the last economic crisis, but the numbers that I am asking her about relate to her Government's proposals under the new scheme. Will she tell her constituents or her Labour councillors—who she does not think should make planning decisions locally—whether she supports the 1,694 fewer houses that her Government are requiring her council to deliver?

Nesil Caliskan: My local authority has committed to building homes and it has a good record. One barrier to being able to deliver homes at speed is the fact that we see infrastructure delayed year after year. With the Bill's proposals to allow CPOs and land assemblies to happen far quicker, we will see homes built at pace in a way that we have not seen in a generation in this country.

I take this opportunity to thank the Ministers and their teams for their work. The Bill provides a generational opportunity for us to get house building back on track in this country. It is a welcome shake-up to the planning system. It will help to deliver the homes and infrastructure that are so desperately needed in this country. It is the first step of many that will allow us to tackle the housing crisis that my constituents in Barking and Dagenham are so badly impacted by every single day.

6.35 pm

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Barking (Nesil Caliskan) in what is a critical and important debate that will affect my constituency in Mid Buckinghamshire very deeply. Back Benchers on both sides of the House have made some sensible suggestions in this debate. I particularly support the points made on the protection of chalk streams, which is important to my constituency as well. But I have deep concerns about the tone of the Bill and some of the rhetoric underneath its defence. I would categorise it as a Bill that does things to communities, particularly rural communities, as opposed to with them.

The Minister can probably predict some of the things I am about to say, as we sat on the Levelling-up and Regeneration Bill Committee in the last Parliament together over very many weeks and with many, many housing Ministers over that period. I will not apologise, however, for representing my constituents who, time after time, are fed up to the back teeth of losing our rural identity and our rural character due to the constant flow of housing and infrastructure projects that devastate our countryside and the rural identity of Buckinghamshire.

Chris Curtis: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Greg Smith: Before I give way to the hon. Gentleman, I just want to say that we in Buckinghamshire feel that we have probably already done our bit with a new town, as it is now a 250,000-population city called Milton Keynes. With that, I will give way to the hon. Member for Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis).

Chris Curtis: I recently visited my 93-year-old grandmother, who was a constituent living in rural Buckinghamshire back in the 1960s. At that time, she expressed many of the concerns that he has just expressed about a city being built around her rural community, but if you ask her now, she will tell you about the fantastic opportunities that Milton Keynes gave to her

[Chris Curtis]

children and grandchildren, to the point where one of them is now sitting on these Benches able to make speeches and interventions. Sometimes we need to have change and development, and sometimes we need to support it.

Greg Smith: I understand the point that the hon. Gentleman is making. Milton Keynes is very close to me. I visit Milton Keynes all the time. I have many friends in Milton Keynes. It is a great city. However, a line in the sand has to be drawn as to the amount of our countryside, our farmland and our food-producing land that we allow to be lost to development of whatever kind.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa), in his speech earlier, reeled off a list of things that were already happening in his constituency, where they are already playing their part. In my own constituency, while we have had concerns about a lot of it, there has been an enormous list of things. The amount of house building in Buckinghamshire has been extraordinary. The village of Haddenham is unrecognisable from what it was because of the sheer volume of new house building that has gone on there. There are also incinerators, and we are about to get a new prison. Despite our objections, HS2 has ravaged the middle of the constituency. It is not as though Buckinghamshire has not done anything.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. We have given way to infrastructure, including HS2, motorways and data centres across the entire green belt with very little community consent, and now, with this new Bill, all community consent seems to be going out the window. How can we protect the vital green space in my constituency, which provides the lungs of London and which will be destroyed because everyone will want a piece of the small bits of green belt we still have left?

Greg Smith: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. The point she makes is absolutely right and it applies equally to my constituency as to hers. In my constituency, the backbone of our economy is agriculture and food production. The Labour party used to say in its manifesto that

“food security is national security”

yet this Bill seeks to build all over the very land that our farmers in Buckinghamshire and across the country use to produce the very food that gives us national security.

I want to focus on the infrastructure implications from the energy sector. I entirely approve of transitioning to cleaner forms of energy production, but it is a point I have made in this House time and again, and I will never get bored of saying it, that it takes 2,000 acres of ground-mounted solar panels to produce enough electricity for 50,000 homes on current usage. That is before everyone has two Teslas—which is perhaps not the brand that people would choose now—on the drive. However, a small modular reactor needs just two football pitches to deliver enough electricity on current usage for 1 million homes. Why on earth in this country are we messing around with solar, destroying thousands of acres of food-producing land, when other clean technologies are out there that can clean up our energy and electricity production in a way that is kinder and gentler on our national fabric and rural communities?

When I hear the Secretary of State talk about, as she did in her opening address, protecting high-grade agricultural land, I take that with a large pinch of salt. That is because, in my constituency in Buckinghamshire, we have caught those paid exorbitant amounts of money to come and grade the land prior to a planning application deliberately testing the land in the headland of the field—the bit not used to grow crops or grass or to graze animals. Of course, they will always get a lower land grade by testing the headland. If the Government are serious about wanting to protect high-grade agricultural land, I would urge the Minister to look at measures he could take to ensure that the fertile part of the field is tested, not the headland.

Matthew Pennycook: Does the hon. Member accept that we have to keep the matter in perspective? Even under the most ambitious scenarios, solar farms would occupy less than 1% of the UK’s agricultural land. That is why the National Farmers Union president Tom Bradshaw stated in relation to the impact of solar projects on food security that it is important not to be “sensationalist”.

Greg Smith: The point the Minister makes is one that certainly in Buckinghamshire I would challenge. I do not think any Labour Members were there, but there was a good cross-party meeting a couple of weeks ago on the scale of solar projects coming into this country. That disproportionately affects rural communities, and this Bill seems to take against them in favour of the UK’s towns and cities.

On top of the stats I gave earlier on the efficiency of solar, we have had scientists—not just campaigners—come here to give clear evidence that, of all the countries in the world, only one is less suitable for solar than ours, and that is Iceland. The Government are not even making the case for a technology that is particularly suited to the United Kingdom, yet the Bill would just make it easier, and those who object to or challenge it on any level will just to have to go away, suck it up and take those projects in their backyard.

This Bill takes away local control, and for me, local control will always be the most important part of the planning process. Unlike those doing the desktop exercise from afar, the community know the fields that flood every single year, know the local factors that would impact a planning application, understand the local roads that would have to take the construction traffic and that get churned up every time a development comes along, and know how unsuitable they are. Local control is critical, and I urge the Minister, even at this late hour, to go back and think about whether what he wants to do is simply ride roughshod over local opinion.

6.44 pm

Peter Lamb (Crawley) (Lab): Despite the many fine contributions made by Members so far and no doubt many yet to come, planning is quite a dreary subject for many. Indeed, I heard some senior Members of this House privately describe it as such. I can well remember as a young Labour member sitting through constituency party meetings wondering why we were talking about planning for such a long time. Surely, I thought, we should want to focus on education, health and inequality. I am afraid that it took me a long time to realise—until I was one of those dreary people sitting at meetings

saying these things—that planning is central not only to each of those issues, but to just about every aspect of Government policy and, indeed, to our daily lives.

Unfortunately, far too often the system and those we task with running it come under attack, including by those who should know better. Planning is attacked for delays, excessive red tape and perceptions of nimbyism. For every 10 planning applications submitted, nine are approved. That is hardly the sign of a system opposed to development. Where the system struggles is with capacity. The time it takes for a decision to be reached has increased significantly over the years, not just for the application but all the subsequent decisions required for development to commence.

Chris Curtis: Does my hon. Friend agree that that is why we need significantly more planning officers in our local authorities to ensure that we can unlock a lot of that development?

Peter Lamb: My hon. Friend must be reading ahead. The impact on escalating costs and viability as a result of the delays is hard to overstate. The capacity issues do not stem from laziness or as a covert form of development suppression; they stem from one issue and one issue only: the absence of sufficient numbers of planners in the public sector. The rates of pay at local authorities are massively out of kilter with the private sector. The consequence is that an increasingly small number of extremely hard-working people are left trying to keep the system afloat principally out of their public spiritedness. Yet, instead of receiving the thanks they deserve, all too often they have to deal with public rhetoric that regularly denigrates them and the work they do. I hope that I am not the first or the last in this Chamber to thank those public servants for their efforts on behalf of our communities and country.

Much needs to be done to reverse the decline in public sector planner numbers. While the Bill sets out many positive steps forward, I remain of the belief that few areas in the public sector would be better suited to, or would generate better economic returns from, the introduction of AI than planning. It could use decades' worth of computerised training data to deal with simple applications automatically, freeing up expert human planners to deal with the cases that would genuinely benefit from a human eye.

As a former council leader, I am defensive of the record of local government in planning. However, despite my initial scepticism, I found much that is good in the new national planning policy framework and in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, showing that this Government genuinely listen to voices across the sector.

Rebecca Smith: Given the hon. Member's expertise as a former council leader, would he agree that the provision in the Bill that enables councils to set fees for planning could go further, particularly around the fees that could be charged for enforcement cases? He will know the amount of hours that planning officers spend tied up in their inboxes dealing with the enforcement of rogue individuals who seem to play cat and mouse with officials. Would he agree that a look at fees might be a sensible option?

Peter Lamb: I have learned over the years not to look a gift house in the mouth. This is a positive step forward. No doubt other steps could be taken in future, but this is significant in enabling the system to be far more sustainable than it has been of late.

There must always be a role for local expertise and knowledge in planning decisions and democratic oversight, but that does not mean that the way we have always done things in the past needs to be the way we do it in the future. Indeed, it does not mean a better or fairer outcome, and a longer process is not always a better one. I am sure that we all have experience of planning decisions, both nationally and locally, that have taken a long time to produce the decision we all knew would be the final decision from day one, and that in no way meet the needs of residents or our community. Planners tell me that planning is a matter of balance, and in this Bill, the Government balance all the relevant considerations well.

Another example of delivering balance is in dealing with nature. Crawley has the second worst housing crisis in the country, and during my time as leader of the council, I delivered over four times the number of units as our centrally assessed Government housing target. I point out that targets are a floor not a ceiling—they in no way restrict future development.

That came to an end when Natural England unilaterally imposed water neutrality restrictions on all development in north Sussex—an area that, according to the figures, has a larger economy than most of our core cities—on the basis that it had concerns about the wellbeing of the little whirlpool ramshorn snail. As a result, since that time, housing delivery in my area has ground to a halt and economic development has been hampered, and Members would not believe the level of debate taking place on Facebook about whether Taco Bell will ever open. All the while, we are waiting for our local water company to build the water infrastructure that has been desperately needed for some time.

I have nothing against little snails, but the consequence of that decision is that, until Natural England feels that its needs have been satisfied, almost 2% of my community is trapped in temporary housing at huge cost to the public sector—not to mention the enormous human cost to those families. The ability to improve our natural environment alongside development is a vital part of being able to avoid forcing a conflict between human and environmental need. The offsetting process that the Bill delivers is exactly the change that we require.

I am also pleased to see in the Bill the development of spatial development strategies, which are a vital part of ensuring that housing needs are addressed beyond the limitations of any single authority. Anyone who has dealt with the current duty to co-operate system will recognise that it is largely a paper exercise that in no way actually delivers the housing required across sub-regions. Spatial development strategies overcome that in a coherent and planned-out way, and at a level far closer and more democratically accountable to residents than the old regional spatial strategies—a significant improvement.

This Government are finally giving the planning system the modernisation that it needs, and I very much hope that they do not stop now. With that in mind, I will end on a topic of great concern to me: affordable housing. The NPPF is right not to set out strict affordability

[Peter Lamb]

requirements for local plans, given the differences in local viability, in addition to setting out a 15% additional requirement for greenfield land. New towns will no doubt have a significant role to play in delivering new affordable housing, as will the relatively small amount of funding allocated so far, but I believe that much more needs to be done to deliver the number of affordable homes that are needed. Although I could bore the Minister with many suggestions, I will focus on sub-regional planning through the new spatial development strategies.

Housing is not merely a numbers game. Other factors matter, not least the size and cost of housing. Although there are mechanisms for delivering overall housing numbers, in areas such as my own, where the duty to co-operate is facilitated, meeting those numbers very often delivers housing that is neither affordable nor the right type and for which there are no allocation rights. I very hope that the Government will correct those issues in their work.

6.52 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): There are so many points to address in the Bill, but I will keep my remarks to just a few. I have grave concerns that the Government's agreeable aim of freeing up our planning system will be dragged further by this Bill into the bog of planning delay and indecision.

There has been a lot of talk about whether the Bill will afford special protections for peatland on sites of special scientific interest, but I have looked at the detail and have concerns that, rather than leading to better protections for peatland areas, the Bill does the opposite. I will start my contribution by explaining why that is such a huge issue.

Take Walshaw moor, which borders my constituency, just next to the Worth valley in my beautiful part of West Yorkshire. Most importantly, it is an irreplaceable blanket bog peatland and carries protected status. It is a site of heavily protected bird species and ground-nesting birds. Recently, it has become the proposed site for what would be England's largest onshore wind farm.

I am firmly opposed to that development. The disruption that a new wind farm would cause, through the constructions of 65 turbines—each taller than Blackpool tower—would be devastating to the blanket bog peatland. In fact, peat bogs across the UK store many times more carbon than our forests. Disturbing that peatland by constructing a wind farm on top of it could release many tonnes of carbon back into the atmosphere, directly contradicting the aim of the whole development—namely, to reduce carbon emissions. It is simply nonsensical to use Walshaw moor when the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds has shown that the Government could achieve their targets for wind power without building on a single acre of protected peatland.

Let me come to the substance of the Bill as it relates to that development. The introduction of environmental development plans seems like a good idea: why shouldn't developers pay some form of compensation for the environmental damage that their developments cause? As is always the case, however, things begin to unravel when we delve into the detail. What this change effectively amounts to is a mercenary approach to environmental

protection that gives developers a much freer hand to negotiate their commitments. Indeed, local planning authorities will be given a much freer hand to take a looser approach in ensuring that developers do their fair bit for any environmental mitigation measures, particularly on protected sites, with the emphasis on a financial contribution.

Funding for restoration, either on site or indeed mitigated elsewhere, does not undo the damage caused by the development—be it to assets of scientific, natural or cultural value. In the case of a protected peatland such as Walshaw moor, that is exactly why the current proposed development is completely the wrong approach. The bogs themselves take millennia to reform, and sphagnum moss breaks down so slowly—by just 1 mm a year—to form peat. That is why the removal of the moratorium on onshore wind farms, which will allow more protected peatland to be built on, is the wrong approach from the Government. I cannot stress that enough. The Bill moves us from a dynamic in which we proactively protect what we value to one in which we barter what we can price up and pretend that value and price are the same.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Many aspects of the Bill will affect Scotland and make things much more difficult for local residents to oppose certain types of application, including those in my constituency who are fighting hard against a 94 km pylon route and battery storage plants. For me, democratic accountability should be at the heart of the planning process, but we seem to be moving towards a planning system that China would be proud of. Does he agree?

Robbie Moore: I absolutely agree. It is why the Government should be honest with the public that, far from strengthening environmental protections, the Bill creates a direct avenue for developers to pay to do environmental damage and get around otherwise more stringent protection laws.

Matthew Pennycook: The hon. Gentleman was here in the last Parliament. Does he remember that, in their attempt to undo the problem of nutrient neutrality, the previous Government sought to disapply the habitats regulations entirely? Is that the approach that he would prefer we take?

Robbie Moore: The Minister gets to the nub of the issue in that the nutrient neutrality issue caused an absolute stagnation in housing development. Indeed, the Government want to give Natural England even more powers, which will lead not only to increased stagnation in development but to frustration for those who want development to take place. Many Members from across the House have referred to the £100 million bat tunnel and the development of HS2. Natural England raised that issue, yet the Government want to give that very organisation even more powers, which will lead to increased stagnation in development.

The Government may bring forward a Bill to create an avenue for more development, but this Bill will not achieve that given the environmental protection measures. In the light of the Government's removal of the moratorium on onshore wind farm development, coupled with the

provisions in the Bill, I fear for our protected peatlands, not only in the beautiful uplands of West Yorkshire but right across the county.

Secondly, I fear that the Bill will not create the speedy planning system that the Government hope it will. By placing the design and formulation of environmental development plans in the hands of Natural England, the Government have ceded much of their control over them. As a single-issue public body, Natural England operates with a very different interpretation of “reasonable mitigations” than the rest of the public when it comes to preserving nature—I have already referred to the £100 million HS2 bat tunnel.

As developers, Natural England and environmental campaigners barter over the details of environmental development plans and lodge legal challenges against them, how will the Secretary of State speed up our planning system, as she is forced to sit on the sidelines of those negotiations and watch Natural England take a lead? She has created a Bill that hands more power to Natural England, not less, and removes her ability to ensure that infrastructure can be delivered at speed. The Government must be honest and up front about what they value.

Finally, I would like to raise another issue in the Bill which, in my view, moves from naivety to the realm of malice. Compulsory purchase orders are highly controversial at the best of times, but in another blow to our rural communities the Government have decided that landowners should not be paid the value of their land in full.

Chris Curtis: I have an essay in front of me, in which it is argued that when the Government pay for new infrastructure, new roads or new developments in order to unlock new housing, the landowner

“has only to sit still and watch complacently his property multiplying in value, sometimes manifold, without either effort or contribution on his part.”

The argument is that the landowner should not get that profit with no effort. That is not from Trotsky; that is from Winston Churchill—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order.

Robbie Moore: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is not fair at all for the state, be it national Government or our local authorities, to step in and not pay a landowner the market value they deserve. It is absolutely outrageous that this Government are introducing legislation, and changing section 12 of the Land Compensation Act 1961 on that basis. I do not think that that will create any efficiency within the planning system, and neither—dare I say it?—will it create any better means of money being spent by local authorities to deliver public services.

Joy Morrissey: We have seen with HS2 an example of planning authorities being taken over in a way that was not the traditional compulsory purchase process. HS2 has been allowed to take over properties, and not pay market value or even take possession. People are still waiting for compensation—their homes devastated, losing everything because of HS2’s ability to take over.

Robbie Moore: Let me get to the point—I know time is short, Madam Deputy Speaker. This Government’s approach in the Bill will not deliver planning done

at speed, and it will not give the environmental protections that the Government are indicating to the wider public. It is not a good Bill.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): With an immediate four-minute time limit, I call Mike Reader.

7.1 pm

Mike Reader (Northampton South) (Lab): The Bill represents the most substantial reform to our planning system in a generation, and one that is critical to my constituents back home in Northampton South. For too long our planning system has functioned as a brake on growth, rather than an accelerator, and when the public think about planning, they picture an antiquated, costly and labyrinthine system. While many Members of the House were probably glued to their TV screens last May, when a soggy Prime Minister stood in front of No. 10, I was at the UK’s Real Estate Investment and Infrastructure Forum discussing this very topic. One stat stuck in my head: only 17% of people believe that the planning system works in their favour. It is clear that reform is needed.

The Bill introduces vital changes to our planning frameworks, including improvements to how we deliver nationally significant infrastructure projects, reforms to compulsory purchase orders, and measures to boost local planning. I wish to respond to the Bill through the lens of how it benefits strategic regional placemaking, and how it could massively improve the delivery of major infrastructure. The introduction of spatial development strategies, and the Bill’s approach to strategic planning, are significant steps forward. Combined with the forthcoming English devolution Bill, that will put more power, not less, into the hands of local people. For too long our planning system has lacked the regional co-ordination needed to deliver homes and infrastructure at scale. In my view, those reforms will help to ensure that local authorities work together effectively across boundaries and across political parties.

Some Members of the House will know that I worked in construction before I was elected, and for me a real frustration has been the lack of pace in delivering major programmes in the UK. Locally I saw first hand the delays that the development consent order process faces. Just down the road from me, the A14 Huntingdon to Cambridge bypass was a real success story when it was finally delivered—it was delivered early and on budget—but it took three attempts to get through the DCO process. That meant years of congestion and pollution for local residents, and a direct, negative impact on the logistics and manufacturing businesses that I represent. More recently, my experience working with teams on the Lower Thames crossing, the A303 Stonehenge bypass, Heathrow and new nuclear, has showed me just how antiquated and cumbersome our process has become.

I therefore welcome the steps taken in the Bill to improve consenting processes, speed up decision making, and reduce the risk of erroneous judicial reviews for major programmes, as was highlighted in the Banner review. However, I think the Government could go further, and I wonder whether the Minister would consider, in this Bill or in future legislation, reforming the outdated requirements for pre-submission consultation in the

[Mike Reader]

Planning Act 2008. I am hugely supportive of the Bill's direction, but we must all recognise that legislation alone cannot fix this problem. To pick up on a comment from my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), we must look at the Building Safety Regulator and make sure that that does not become a new bottleneck. Recent data reveal a concerning backlog, showing that only two higher-risk schemes had been approved out of 130 applications since the new gateway process began in October 2023. The decision process is now taking months, not the eight to 12 weeks that we were expecting from the regulator.

Finally, I have concerns about bottlenecks, and about part 3 of the Bill and the environmental delivery plans and nature restoration fund. In principle that solution is practical and will unlock delivery, but I ask the Minister whether Natural England will be given the resources and funding it needs to ensure that it does not become a new bottleneck in the planning system. Overall I fully support the Bill, and look forward to its progressing through the House.

7.5 pm

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): The Bill is about speeding up planning processes, judicial reviews and the development of critical infrastructure. Although some elements of the Bill are positive, others risk undermining the long-term success of any development. The Bill gives the Secretary of State power to decide the consenting route for individual projects, bypassing local input and oversight. That is combined with the overall reduction in local democratic control by transferring significant powers from local councillors to planning officers.

Currently, planning committees are the place where elected officials can reflect local concerns and represent their communities in decision making. By shifting more power to unelected officers, we risk alienating the public and further eroding trust in local democracy. That is especially important given the shift towards creating larger unitary authorities. We see that already in Somerset, where my constituents have seen Sedgemoor district council, a small but effective planning authority, replaced by a larger but less effective unitary council. That may be connected with the fact that Somerset is run by the Liberal Democrats. If local decision making becomes more detached, how can we be sure that developments will reflect the needs and desires of the people who will live with them?

Gideon Amos: Does the hon. Gentleman recall that when the Conservative leaders of the district council endorsed the unitary council, a poll was taken of the people of Somerset and they voted against it, but the Conservatives pushed it through?

Sir Ashley Fox: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but the Liberal Democrats have been responsible since 2022 for the mess that has become Somerset. I am in favour in principle of building more houses, but it must be done in a way that brings local communities with us. We must ensure that new developments are accompanied by the right infrastructure—schools, health centres, roads, and a proper number of green spaces in between. When the Government

announced their new housing targets, it became immediately apparent that the bulk of the increase would be in rural areas, so while Somerset as a whole has seen an increase of 41% in its housing target, the City of Bristol has seen its target reduced by 11%. Why is that? If it is related to the high number of Labour councillors in Bristol, and the very small number of Labour councillors in Somerset, we should be told.

The Bill also proposes a new nature restoration fund, which developers can pay into to offset environmental impacts, rather than conduct individual environmental assessments. Although I can see the logic of that move in some cases, I have concerns about the impact in Somerset. Given the network of waterways across the Somerset levels, the environmental impact of any individual site has the potential to spread to a much wider area than in much of the rest of the country. It is for such reasons that local accountability is so important, and by shifting the planning system to make it too top heavy, the Government risk unintended local consequences.

On compulsory purchase powers, the Government argue that streamlining the process will allow housing and infrastructure projects to progress more quickly. I am concerned about the abuse of power, particularly in relation to agricultural land and green spaces. By simplifying land acquisitions and reducing protections for affected landowners, the Bill could pave the way for large-scale developments that displace communities, damage the environment and undermine agricultural interests. The Government have already done great damage to the farming community in Somerset with their family farm tax and the closure, without notice, of the sustainable farming incentive. The proposal seems like another Government scheme to impoverish our farmers.

Although the Government's aim to address the housing crisis and accelerate infrastructure development is important, the Bill raises significant concerns. It risks undermining local democracy, environmental protections and citizens' ability to hold developers and the Government to account.

If we are to build a sustainable future that is responsive to the needs of our communities, we must approach this Bill with caution. That is why I shall seek to improve it before we give it a Third Reading.

7.10 pm

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): I strongly support the Bill because at its heart is a vision for getting Britain building again—in the right way and for the right reasons. That is critical to overcoming many of the challenges we face as a country. It is central to the missions of change that the public have entrusted us with, and it is a call to action that we must answer.

The Bill sets out a bold plan to modernise our planning system. As someone who worked for decades with engineers, operational workers and planners, I can tell hon. Members that it is long overdue. It seeks to make the system more efficient and responsive to the demands of a 21st-century economy that is capable of supporting the ambitions that the Government have set forth: solving the housing crisis by delivering 1.5 million new homes; tackling the cost of living by reducing bills and putting more money back in people's pockets; building a strong, growing economy; making Britain a global leader in green energy and technology; tackling the climate crisis, and creating thousands of high-skilled, well-paid jobs.

The housing crisis affects too many families across our country. For far too many, the dream of owning or renting a home in the areas where they live and work is slipping further out of reach. I was asked about that at the New College hustings by young adults who never thought they would get a foot on the housing ladder. I am proud that we are doing something about it. The Bill aims to tackle the challenge by streamlining the planning process, cutting delays and accelerating the delivery of new homes. It introduces provisions that will allow us to build where homes are most needed, while ensuring that development is sustainable and in harmony with the environment.

The Bill is about building not just new homes, but affordable homes. For years, waiting lists for social housing have stretched beyond acceptable limits, with families waiting years for a safe and affordable place to live. In my constituency, there is a mum with three children under five living in temporary accommodation because of section 21. She has no kitchen to make food and nowhere to wash her children's clothes. Worst of all, she has no hope left. The Bill tackles that reality head-on and provides hope.

On Friday night, I slept out with 40 other individuals at Donny Rovers to raise awareness of homelessness, and took the time to discuss the housing crisis. That same night, 3,350 children were homeless in Yorkshire and the Humber. That is just wrong. It was wrong in the 1990s, when I became homeless with my mum and sister, and it is absolutely unacceptable in the 2020s.

The Bill will make a real difference to communities across the UK. It gives local councils the tools they need to meet housing demands, while ensuring that social housing is built in the right places and to the highest standards.

The Bill also recognises the need for infrastructure investment in driving growth and prosperity. From towns to cities, we must invest in transport, digital connectivity and energy systems. The Bill lays the groundwork for large-scale infrastructure projects, making it easier for local authorities and developers to bring forward critical projects, such as new roads, renewable energy solutions and expanded public transport networks. That is important for both rural and urban communities. The Bill is about ensuring that our infrastructure evolves alongside modern needs, enabling more efficient travel, supporting thriving businesses, and fostering growing communities.

The legislation is a vital step forward in addressing some of the most pressing issues in our country. I urge all my colleagues, on both sides of the House, to support the Bill. Let us unite in building a more prosperous, sustainable and secure future for the people we serve. No child should go to sleep tonight not knowing whether they will have a roof over their precious head tomorrow. We can solve that together.

7.14 pm

Mr Angus MacDonald (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): I welcome the Deputy Prime Minister's decision to introduce powers to create a bill discount scheme to help households closest to new electricity transmission infrastructure. However, to be clear, the scheme is nowhere near enough. It falls short as both a meaningful community benefit and a measure to address local opposition to new infrastructure projects.

The proposed £250 annual discount for households within 500 metres of major transmission infrastructure equates to just 6.25% off bills in rural Britain each year. It does not even match the cancellation of the £300 winter fuel allowance. Even that modest £250 concession is limited to a decade. For families living beside towering pylons and substations, it is a poor trade-off for the lasting impact on their environment and quality of life.

More fundamentally, why are rural communities, which already pay the highest energy prices in the country, expected to accept such a meagre offer? In our cities and major towns, such as Ashton-under-Lyne, households with access to mains gas pay around 6p per kWh for their energy. In contrast, those in rural areas, who are far more likely to be affected by these infrastructure developments, pay 24p per kWh for their electricity. How is it right that the very communities that live alongside renewable energy generation and face some of the highest rates of fuel poverty are expected to pay four times as much as those on mains gas?

Renewable electricity is cheaper to produce, yet rural households are still being charged four times the price of largely imported carbon fuel mains gas. Where is the fairness in that? If the Government are serious about ensuring that communities benefit from new infrastructure, they must do better than the miserable £250 a year.

Beyond energy costs, the Minister will know that transmission companies, such as Scottish and Southern Electricity Networks, anticipate being required to build temporary housing for their workers. They have offered to build legacy housing, which would remain for the rural communities, but the Bill does not cover that. Affordable housing is one of the greatest challenges facing rural Britain. Including legacy housing in the Bill could make a real difference to affordable housing in those areas. Will the Minister explain why such a provision has been omitted and commit to addressing the matter?

If the Government want communities to accept new infrastructure, they must offer something meaningful in return: real, lasting benefits that acknowledge the burden placed on those who live alongside the developments. The energy bill discount scheme in its current form is a long way from that.

7.17 pm

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): I put on record my strong support for the Bill. I want to focus much of my contribution today on two aspects—nature recovery and electricity infrastructure. Net zero and nature are two sides of the same coin, and it would be a coin with no value if we had one without the other.

The proposed environmental delivery plans and the nature restoration fund are positive steps that could transform nature's recovery. In Suffolk, we have seen how that idea can work well. The Wildlife Trusts' biodiversity net gain service has helped to establish new nature reserves, such as Martlesham Wilds on the River Deben. However, more can be done to ensure that nature and development sit happily alongside each other.

First, we must make it explicit that there are firm timeframes for the delivery of conservation measures set out in an EDP. Secondly, we must have higher expectations of developers. Nature-rich open spaces, nature highways and solar panels on new builds are incredibly simple things to implement, but they will make a world of difference to our communities and to nature.

[Jenny Riddell-Carpenter]

I turn to the electricity infrastructure aspects of the Bill and why they are so important in Suffolk Coastal, where we have four nationally significant energy infrastructure projects planned with Sizewell C, National Grid, National Grid Ventures and ScottishPower Renewables. It is often said that up to 25% of the UK's energy will be either made in or transported through my constituency. We are home to some of the most important biodiverse sites in the UK, with 36 sites of special scientific interest in the constituency, and more than 50% of Suffolk Coastal is designated as a natural landscape.

Paul Holmes: The hon. Lady is quite rightly outlining how the environment should be protected, which I believe is part of the aim of the Bill. How does she defend to her constituents the fact that under Ministers' proposals, her housing targets will be uplifted by 82%?

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: I wonder if the hon. Gentleman rolls out that line to every Member. I am actually talking about the SSSIs and the energy infrastructure, rather than housing. The sites that I speak of—the SSSIs and the natural landscapes—are not only recognised by but critical for this Government if we are to deliver on our ambitions to improve biodiversity.

There has been much talk in the press of late about nimbyism, but I ask the Minister: are people nimbys if they ask why nature-rich marshlands and the RSPB's nature reserves are picked as the best place for National Grid's energy infrastructure to make landfall? Are people nimbys if they question why the four projects I have mentioned are being brought forward in isolation from each other and with no co-ordination? Are people nimbys if they fully support our country's push to net zero, but they ask if they can do more to protect nature? If we listened more to some of those fair and valid questions, we could do more to protect nature and progress with net zero.

The previous Government totally vacated the space of leadership in our country's energy and biodiversity planning. That void was filled by energy developers, which were left to take the lead and bring forward proposals that were totally unsuitable in our landscapes, all because it was cheaper than taking projects to brownfield sites. We have been left with a series of unco-ordinated, whack-a-mole projects on the east coast of England. The much-welcomed land use framework should be extended to create a land and sea use framework to allow for better leadership and co-ordination of energy infrastructure projects. First and foremost, it is critical we ensure that energy developers that are working in the same area work with communities to plan for the cumulative impact of these vast projects.

The community often has the answers to problems that the developers do not. For instance, farmers have told me that it should be a requirement to bury network cables to a minimum of 1.8 metres on arable farming land. That is the minimum legal standard required for arable farmers to continue to use their land for farming. It seems common sense to make that a requirement.

I do not have time today to go into detail on the need for community benefits to deliver for communities who host infrastructure, but while I welcome the Government's recent announcements, which mean that communities

such as mine that may be set to host substations should benefit, we can be far more ambitious. We can and should expect more from private firms that profit so vastly from the great green energy revolution. I urge the Government to consider those aspects of the Bill.

7.22 pm

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): As a central Bedfordshire councillor, I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

There is much to welcome in this Bill, particularly its ambition to get nationally significant infrastructure built to support our country. While I disagree with the Government's allocation of housing targets that favour building over our countryside, rather than the densification of our cities, where building homes would alleviate the worst of the acute housing crisis, I recognise the Government's mandate to build 1.5 million homes and the need for ambitious planning reform. What are the Government doing to ensure that the 1.6 million homes with existing planning approval are built? I see nothing in this Bill.

Mid Bedfordshire has done more than its fair share in recent years to accommodate new housing, with the boroughs of central Bedfordshire and Bedford growing by 16% and 18% respectively over 10 years. We are not anti-development, but some development has changed the character of our historical market towns and quiet rural villages forever. Development is increasing the flooding risk in Maulden in my constituency, where compounded up-slope development has exacerbated the impact of pluvial flooding. We have development that has not delivered long-promised infrastructure, such as in Wixams in my constituency—a development where shovels first went into the ground nearly two decades ago but residents are yet to see the delivery of a new GP surgery. It is because of such issues that communities have become hardened to the prospect of yet more building.

This Government have a real opportunity, with thought and consideration, to create a planning system that people can have confidence in. Instead, people have been dismissed simply as blockers. The pensioners who fear a flood every time it rains—blockers. The young parents who cannot get to their GP because a surgery has not been built in their town—blockers. People with real, genuine concerns whom we in this House were elected to stand up for are not blockers, and this Bill could do much more for them.

Joy Morrissey: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point about the “blockers”. These are people who live on floodplains, who have been waiting years for a GP surgery and who have never had any of the key infrastructure that they asked for delivered. They cannot have property built in certain places because of floodplains. That is not acknowledged in this Bill, which makes no provision for those residents.

Blake Stephenson: Absolutely. Since Bedfordshire was flooded in September, Ministers will know that I have been vocal about improving resilience, and the Government can do that in this Bill. New houses mean nothing if residents find themselves ankle-deep in water in their living rooms, as they did across the country last year.

I want the measures on nature recovery to be strengthened to include explicit plans to deliver nature-based solutions to flooding. I want schedule 3 to the Flood and Water Management Act 2010 to be brought into force to ensure that communities have the right protections from flooding. I want this Bill to give internal drainage boards more powers to take over the maintenance of infrastructure to protect people from flooding. If it does not, local authorities should have the enforcement powers to ensure that sustainable drainage is maintained.

I also want to see more robust measures in this Bill ruling out development on floodplains, which goes to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey). The Bill could make a real difference to our resilience to flooding, and I urge the Government not to miss this opportunity. Despite protections in the NPPF, we still see development in functional floodplains. Rivers were here before us; they do not know and they do not care that we are here. As the Dutch have done successfully, we need to make room for our rivers. We must get out of their way, with stronger protections against development in floodplains.

I turn briefly to new towns, which are provided for in this legislation through development corporations. It will be important to ensure that those corporations have the power to deliver real places and communities, not just the cookie-cutter dormitory-on-trainline that developers might like to churn out for the highest possible profit margins. New towns should capture the essence and spirit of the communities into which they are sown, and they need to be beautiful, as the Deputy Prime Minister reflected on in her opening remarks. The Government should also address important questions that they are currently dodging on how these new towns will interplay with wider local development strategies. I am disappointed not to see some of that detail ironed out in this Bill.

New towns will result in a double whammy of housing development for some communities, but we do not yet know exactly how damaging that might be. The Government are also yet to confirm whether the housing provided by new towns will count towards a five-year land supply, meaning that our communities could be forced to take far more housing than they need, without the right infrastructure, unless this Bill is strengthened.

This Government talk about being on the side of the builders, not the blockers, but without improvements, I am afraid that the Bill is almost guaranteed to create a new generation of so-called blockers. Homes are needed so that young people who aspire to own their own home can do so. Most of the blockers, as this Government like to call them, are not standing in the way of progress: they are standing up for their communities against bad development.

7.28 pm

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): I congratulate the Secretary of State and the Minister for Housing and Planning, my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), on bringing this Bill before the House, not least because I really believe it is potentially the most important Bill to be brought forward in this Parliament. As a country, we have not been building enough homes or infrastructure, and our planning system does not deliver for nature. This is about more than just homes, infrastructure and nature: this is one of the root causes of our falling productivity. It has been undermining growth and jobs.

However, this is also about the home and the roof over people's heads: it is fundamentally about people. My parents grew up in council housing. My grandparents spent most of their lives living in council housing—in fact, my nan and grandad on my dad's side were low-wage cleaners, with my nan working into her 70s and living in a council flat in Battersea for the best part of 50 years. That council flat offered my grandparents the foundation to be able to bring up my dad—the same was true on my mum's side—and, later on, to provide security and a better life for me and my sister. Too many people in low-wage jobs, wherever they are in the country, can no longer afford to buy or rent a home. That is fundamentally what this Bill is about.

To say that we would not start from here is an understatement. In 2010, the then Housing Minister boldly claimed that the Conservative Government would radically improve housing affordability. In my constituency, affordability has massively decreased; when the previous Government came to power, the median house prices to earnings ratio was 6.8, but it was 8.8 by the end of that Government. George Osborne promised a major change in how we build infrastructure in this country. What he failed to mention was that the average consent time for nationally significant infrastructure projects would nearly double.

Josh MacAlister (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): In my constituency, we have hundreds of acres of land that is perfect for new nuclear power to be built. As a country, we have not completed a nuclear power station in over 30 years, and part of the reason for that is the state of our planning system. Does my hon. Friend agree that by making the changes in this Bill, we will be able to unlock vital national infrastructure such as new nuclear?

Luke Murphy: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention—it is no surprise that he is raising the issue of nuclear, for which he is a doughty champion in this Chamber. I very much agree with him about the need to build new nuclear, and I recognise the previous Government's failure to do so.

Fundamentally, this Bill is about building more homes, building infrastructure and protecting nature. My constituency of Basingstoke is a growing town—no change there. We have been a growing town for many years, since the 1960s, as a London overspill town. We have grown significantly, but I want this Bill to bring about a different approach: one that builds the homes that are so desperately needed, but also ensures that they are more affordable, builds the necessary infrastructure alongside them, and protects nature. The previous Government did none of those things.

I will mention a few measures in the Bill that I particularly welcome. First, the commitment to cut the timeline for nationally significant infrastructure projects by 50% is incredibly welcome—internationally, this country has become a laughing stock when it comes to our ability to deliver significant infrastructure. The measures to overhaul connections to the grid for the electricity network are also incredibly welcome; in a poll by Cornwall Insight, 75% of those involved in clean power said that the grid connection issue was the biggest barrier to us delivering on our clean power ambitions. The Bill also streamlines and improves our processes for transport infrastructure, as well as improving the roll-out of electric vehicle chargers, a technology that Conservative Members now apparently oppose.

[*Luke Murphy*]

I really welcome the changes to planning fees—not just the changes in this Bill, but those announced previously by the Government. One of the key reasons why developments have been gummed up in the planning system is the lack of capacity within that system to deliver on them. The Bill should restore the role of the planner, not just as a tick-box exercise but to genuinely plan the places in which people live. As someone who was a political adviser to the Labour Opposition between 2010 and 2015, I also highly endorse the proposals on development corporations and compulsory purchase. Contrary to what has been said by Conservative Members, CPO reform is essential to delivering the housing that we need. As my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis) highlighted, it was backed by Winston Churchill, who recognised that hope value did not belong to the landowner but was the result of Government investment in infrastructure. That was also recognised by known left wingers such as Adam Smith.

To go back to where I started, this Bill is fundamentally about delivering affordable homes for people who badly need them, wherever they live. I want to be able to look my constituents in the eyes and say that they are going to have access to an affordable home, just like my grandparents did so many years ago.

7.34 pm

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): First, I wholly respect the intention behind the Bill; it is a serious attempt to solve a serious problem. I also recognise that what was happening under the Conservatives did not work, and never could have worked even if we had given it 1,000 years. All it achieved was to fuel house price inflation, which has now created a destructive division into a nation of haves and have-nots. But I judge this new Planning and Infrastructure Bill through the lens of my own constituency—will it work for Horsham? Will it deliver affordable homes in the right places and with the right environmental standards? I think the answer is no.

The main reason is that the Bill is based on the same mistaken premise as the previous system. The problem lies with how housing targets are worked out—not the national target, which gets all the publicity, but local targets. Why are targets so hard to meet? The reason is that the Conservatives invented a catastrophically bad formula for calculating housing need, which is called the standard method. It measures the ratio of local house prices to local wages, and the bigger the gap, the higher the target goes. The idea is that communities just keep building houses until the price comes down. The only problem is that it does not work. It turns out that in Horsham—as in many places—the average price of a new house is higher than the price of the existing stock, so the more we build, the worse the ratio gets and the higher the target goes. That is the exact opposite of what the theory says should happen.

Unfortunately, this new Labour Bill takes the same flawed Tory standard method and pours rocket fuel over it. Targets control planning permissions, but that is not the same thing as actual houses; Horsham already has 13,500 unbuilt permissions, including the emerging local plan. That total could double under Labour's new targets. Does that mean that we are actually going to build tens of thousands more homes? No, it does not.

We could cover every inch of Horsham district in permissions, but it is not the lack of permissions that is holding back the market. Houses do not get built faster, because developers cannot sell them any faster. Some 80% of what we build today is aimed at the top 20% of the market—all of this was described very well in Sir Oliver Letwin's analysis back in 2017. The housing market does not behave as one market; it is like six parallel markets, and the houses we are building are largely serving the top two.

I am desperate to build more affordable homes in Horsham, but clogging up the system with unbuildable permissions is not the way to do it. The best way to build more homes is to build more consent. I said that I would judge this legislation on whether it would work for Horsham, and the answer is that it will not.

7.37 pm

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): Imagine an English village, if you still can—old houses around a village green, with a little school, a pub or two, a post office, a row of shops, and an ancient church with a creaking gate and some crooked headstones with fading bouquets shaded by ancient oaks. It may be a place where old maids hike to Holy Communion through the mists of the autumn morning.

That sort of village is disappearing. Anyone who visits now will find the pub shut for want of drinkers, the shops empty, and the vicar gone—only the fading bouquets remain. There is no doctor's surgery and no bus route. It has isolated, elderly residents; not a child in sight, as if the Pied Piper had been to visit, and ageing parents with none of their family nearby to help. Like so many problems in this country, housing lies at the centre. The houses in this sort of village are occupied by commuters with big cars lurking in the driveway, or by retired folk whose children have long since moved away. For the lowest-paid people, housing is more expensive in the countryside than in every urban area except London, with the cheapest housing costing nine times the average income of the lowest-paid quartile.

Therefore, as the Government construct 1.5 million houses, let us think long and hard about where we will put them. This Bill, together with the changes that the Government have made to the national planning policy framework, will do much to loosen restrictions on house building. The designation of land as grey belt is good for those in suburban green belts, but more can be done to earmark land for housing deep in the countryside.

We ought to encourage more house building at small scale on the edge of villages. For hundreds of years, that was the model of expansion across all of England. It has produced our prettiest villages, where progressively newer buildings radiate outwards from a historical core. That is the sort of development that preserves the character of a village. It is the most popular form of development in the countryside, and the Campaign to Protect Rural England has put its name to a call for small-scale affordable housing on the edge of villages.

We already have places set aside on the peripheries of towns and villages across the country for delivering such community-scale housing. They are called small rural exception sites. Currently, they allow affordable housing to be granted for local development on small sites not usually granted planning permission. Although those are intended to promote the construction of affordable homes,

most of the plots are undeveloped. Minor changes to the national planning guidance are needed to allow for proper development. That will help us to get a lot more use out of such sites, spurring reasonably sized considerate development and ending the pattern of relocation that causes family ties to fragment. Construction will energise a village's economy, giving work to local firms that are well placed to deliver housing quickly and efficiently. This Government can regenerate rural England. This is surely our generation's chance, so let us grasp it.

7.41 pm

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): First, as I think the whole House has suggested in the speeches we have heard, our country does need more homes, particularly for young people. The most obvious stake that a young person can have in society is ownership of their own property that they live in with their family, but it is important that Government get their approach right. There is much to commend in the Government's Bill, but there are also a few points I would like the Minister to focus on.

First, the rural-urban divide has become apparent. In my constituency, Bromsgrove and the villages is 89% green-belt. It is to the south of Birmingham and in the north of Worcestershire. In many ways, it is a rural idyll, yet Bromsgrove is seeing the housing target set by Government increase by 85% at a time when adjacent Birmingham's housing target is decreasing by more than 20%.

Joy Morrissey: My hon. Friend is making an excellent point, because the same thing is true in London. We have seen London housing targets decline for the Mayor of London, who has not met any of his housing targets, and all those extra housing numbers have been forced on to the outer counties surrounding London. I am not sure that is fair or will produce the housing that people need.

Bradley Thomas: My hon. Friend makes a great point. In fact, she leads me to a point I want to stress to the Minister, which is about intensive urban densification. Our country faces a real opportunity if we focus on increasing the number of properties, particularly in larger urban areas, including London and Birmingham. It is also a great opportunity to regenerate some of the larger towns across many of our constituencies.

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend is making an interesting and powerful point. As a fellow west midlands MP, I see that opportunity in my constituency. Does he agree that if we can genuinely regenerate our high streets and our town centres, that is the way to revitalise them? It takes the pressure off the peripheral areas and protects us against being subsumed into the cities and urban areas.

Bradley Thomas: I agree wholeheartedly with my right hon. Friend. She makes an important and pertinent point. If we get urban densification right, it is a catalyst for the economic and social renewal of town centres, which is desperately needed.

Luke Murphy *rose*—

Bradley Thomas: I will make a little progress, and then I will give way. Linked to urban densification is a pertinent importance to focus on the quality and aesthetic

of the development that is taking place. I have long been a fervent advocate for design codes and the role that locally led placemaking principles can play in determining the quality of an area and its attractiveness for future inward investment.

I believe instinctively that residents across the country are not nimby, but I fear that successive Governments, including the previous Conservative one and the Labour one before that, have allowed mediocrity to reign. There is a lack of local distinctiveness in development, which causes an entrenched perception of nimbysm running throughout the country. I implore the Government to consider reinstating the Office for Place, which was disbanded back in July, and to think about the importance of those aesthetically-based placemaking principles and the role they can play in promoting the positive impacts of development. Linked to that, we have an acute need and opportunity to promote smaller, more artisanal developers, particularly those focused on developing the vocational skills needed to generate the incoming pipeline of talent to support the house building industry.

I will make a couple of points that relate to my constituency, but they probably apply to many others across the country. One is on the protection of the green belt. Green belt is a technical designation, but to the public at large, it is often considered to be lush open fields and meadows. My constituency has this large buffer between Bromsgrove and Birmingham. It is not the case that residents of Bromsgrove are nimby—I do not believe they are—but they do not want the identity of Bromsgrove to be eroded and, by virtue of that, it to become some kind of extension of Birmingham.

For me, and for many of my constituents, that word “identity” underpins the fundamentals we should be talking about. It is about sense of place and a lifestyle that people identify with. When I think about constituents from my area, they have probably grown up in Birmingham and moved into north Worcestershire. In many cases, they have done that because there is an aspirational element to moving into the countryside, and they want to benefit from the countryside that Worcestershire offers, while being in close proximity to Birmingham and all the services it offers.

I will wrap up my comments with four quick points that I would like the Government to focus on. They should consider intensive urban densification and the positive role that can play in delivering housing where it is needed and where young people live, and in regenerating town centres undergoing a lot of change.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): It strikes me that the hon. Member is speaking a lot about building where young people live. One thing that concerns me as a fellow rural MP is that young people are increasingly forced out of our rural communities. Does he not recognise that we need to look at intelligent, targeted, moderate house building within those communities to preserve them for the future and preserve their demographic future?

Bradley Thomas: The hon. Member makes a very good point, with which I do not disagree. We have to strike a better balance—that is the point I am making. That leads me to my second point, which is around infrastructure. Bromsgrove has suffered from a lot of development in recent years, and it has not had the infrastructure to go

[Bradley Thomas]

with it. If we want to strike the right balance and enable young people to stay in the communities where they grew up, particularly rural ones, we need to have the housing there, but we also need to recognise that rural areas cannot do all the heavy lifting.

7.47 pm

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): For 14 long years, growth in the United Kingdom stagnated with houses that were not built, roads that were not constructed, train lines promised and not delivered, energy and digital infrastructure not fit for current demands and a plodding planning system that has not kept pace with the needs of local communities. I welcome this Bill, as we can now see a pathway to a country where every family can access affordable housing, where businesses thrive with top-tier digital connectivity, and where transport networks support growth, rather than hinder it.

The introduction of a national scheme of administration will empower local planning officers to decide applications more quickly to support local communities and businesses, but at the same time, it is critical that the democratic process remains strong and that the voices of residents and local councillors are heard, if costly delays and appeals are to be avoided. I very much welcome the reassurances given by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister on that point earlier today.

In Scotland, unfortunately, we have all too often had a different story, with local, democratically made planning decisions routinely overturned by the Scottish Government reporters, leaving communities such as East Whitburn and Bathgate feeling ignored, with developments earmarked in areas rich with flora and fauna and where local road infrastructure is already creaking at the seams.

Another long-standing issue is the shortage of planning officers, with three out of 10 planning departments short-staffed and a national shortage of about 2,200 planners. This is a problem that both the SNP and Tory Governments have failed to tackle; indeed, they have exacerbated it through the hollowing out of local government. I welcome the Government's commitment to ensuring that local authorities have the skilled planning officers we need, with the right level of trust and empowerment to decide applications more quickly.

However, we must also consider the severe skills shortages across several sectors over which both Tory and SNP Governments have presided, from planning to construction. We cannot deliver physical and digital infrastructure without the people to produce it. On Friday I visited Sibbald Training in Blackridge, in my constituency, which specialises in construction and plant courses. It was clear from our discussion that there is huge concern in the business community about the possibility that if the skill shortages are not addressed, contracts will be lost, jobs will be lost, and opportunities for young people will go elsewhere. I was therefore delighted to hear yesterday that this Government will train up to 60,000 more construction workers, giving industry certainty that we are committed to investing in construction and infrastructure.

Our communities and industries have long waited for a Government who will take the challenges of energy, planning and development seriously. The Bill is ambitious

in its goals, but, more than that, it is ambitious for communities and businesses across the United Kingdom, and it will get Britain building again.

7.50 pm

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): My constituents and I know how lucky we are to live in such a beautiful part of the United Kingdom. We need to see growth so that our young people can stay in their local communities, buy homes in the areas in which they have grown up, and continue to contribute to the local economy and keep Chichester thriving for generations to come; but the reality is that the planning system in my little patch of the country is not fit for purpose.

With the district council's footprint covering 70% of national park and 5% of national landscape, the ambitious total for housing allocation in our area is confined to just 25% of the available land in a ribbon that is causing coastal squeeze. This has led to high-density developments built without adequate infrastructure, leaving my residents facing daily challenges navigating the horrendous congestion on the A27, finding local school places for their children, or simply obtaining an appointment with a GP. The current system has left my communities frustrated, my local businesses unable to grow, and local councils tied up in red tape, unable to plan.

Housing developers have a duty to create communities, not just buildings, but the very nature of the current planning system means that developers are putting forward proposals that look only at the patches that they are trying to develop rather than the wider picture surrounding it, and the councillors who are elected to represent their areas are fighting with their hands tied behind their backs. In both Chichester and Arun district councils, an application may be refused by the planning committees—perhaps owing to flooding risks, loss of grade 1 agricultural land or inadequate infrastructure in the area—only for that to be overturned at appeal, which is a costly, time-consuming process, taking planners out of the departments where they are trying to plan.

The previous administration in Chichester district council allowed the local plan to expire, which left developers riding roughshod over areas on the Manhood peninsula, a low-lying coastal plain that is susceptible to extreme flooding which seems to be getting worse and worse. The new administration in 2023 focused on producing a robust local plan, which has now been through inspection—to the relief of communities across Chichester—and protects areas such as the Manhood peninsula while prioritising brownfield development, which all of us, on both sides of the House, agree should be the priority for planning. However, the Government's ambitious new housing target could force the council back to square one and put all the power back into the hands of developers, because we are being asked to increase our housing target by nearly 100%.

We do not have a planning crisis; we have a building crisis. Developers are land-banking consents rather than getting on with delivering the homes that we need, because demand drives up prices. Since 2007, more than 1.4 million homes given fully consented permissions have not been built. The Bill does not tackle the workforce issues or the supply chain issues, and it also does not acknowledge that water companies, which are responsible for vital infrastructure to ensure that that their reliance

on storm overflows can reduce over time, are not consulted over individual planning applications because they are not statutory consultees. As the Minister knows, I have called for such consultation in other debates.

Finally, there is no target for social homes in the Bill. Registered providers in Chichester are currently refusing to take on the social homes on smaller mixed-use sites, favouring the larger developments and prioritising upgrading their existing housing stock, which is putting the viability of social homes in my area at serious risk—and they are homes that we are desperately crying out for.

7.55 pm

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): I spent the last seven years of my career working in the social housing sector, so I should like to think that I have some understanding of the scale of the housing challenge, the mistakes made by previous Administrations, and why now is the time to be bold. We need this planning Bill to be bold, because at present we are witnessing a housing crisis in three acts.

First, according to the latest available figures, private renters across the country spend nearly a third of their household income on housing costs. Private renters in all income quintiles—compared with people living in homes of any other tenure—spend the highest proportion of their household income on rent, and we know that the problem is especially acute in our cities and in the south of England. The affordability challenge is not just a problem for the individual, but a problem for society. Money that would otherwise be spent in the everyday economy is going to private landlords.

That is linked with the second point. The vast majority of private renters aspire to home ownership, but as private rents increase and house prices stay stubbornly high, the dream of home ownership looks ever more distant for those who are not lucky enough to rely on the bank of mum and dad. In my constituency the median house price of £435,000 is nearly 11 times the median income of £40,000.

Thirdly, there is the crisis in social housing. Since the right to buy took effect in 1981, we have seen a net loss of social homes in almost every year. That brings me to an earlier exchange between my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Luke Murphy) and the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos). This problem was at its worst at the time of the coalition Government. As my hon. Friend said, there was a dramatic cut in the grant for social and affordable housing under that Government, and there was a double whammy because during the same Parliament, the Conservative Prime Minister increased the discounts for Help to Buy. Let me say to the Liberal Democrats that their former leader made a video apologising for university fees, and they may want to consider one apologising for their record on social housing.

To meet this crisis, we need to use all the levers at our disposal to build the homes and communities that the country needs. In the time that I have left, I want to focus briefly on two points. The first concerns clause 46—which has attracted some interest during the debate—and the provision to streamline planning decisions on smaller sites. It is vital that local accountability remains in the

planning system, and that is protected through the need to have local plans in every community, all of which will require democratic consent. However, it is equally important that we speed things up so that we do not lose months or years endlessly discussing smaller sites that have already been debated and allocated in a local plan. Aspiring homeowners, hard-up renters and those in urgent need of social housing do not have time for that.

I am very invested in clause 91, which introduces long-overdue changes to the compulsory purchase order process and the removal of hope value. For far too long the losers in our system have been the prospective homeowners, the private renters and the social housing residents, while the winners have been the landowners. As it stands, many local authorities have to pay unrealistic premiums for land based on an estimate of its potential value, or hope value, which has too often made it unviable for councils to build much-needed social housing and infrastructure. That has to change, and the Bill will ensure that it does.

As we have heard in the House today, there are Members who want to find new and creative ways to argue against the need for new housing, but that has failed. The status quo has failed us. If we are serious about tackling the housing crisis, we need serious reform. The Bill will deliver it, and can be the catalyst for change.

7.59 pm

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): I refer hon. Members to my entry in the register of interests.

At his first Prime Minister's Question Time in July last year, I asked the Prime Minister to reassure my constituents that they would have a meaningful say over the new development in the green belt in their area. He said that the Government “will work with communities”—but this Bill could not be further from that promise. We are seeing housing targets go through the roof in rural areas, as green-belt protections are removed. In my local councils of East Herts and Broxbourne, the targets are going up by more than 20% and within Broxbourne district specifically they are almost doubling. The loss of protections for unrestricted sprawl around the villages I represent is extremely worrying for my constituents who live in those villages of Brickenden, Hertford Heath, Great Amwell, Stanstead Abbots and St Margarets, as their unique character and historical charm could be lost forever.

At the same time, targets are going down in London, where there is the infrastructure to cope. The plans do not add up. There is something in this Bill on which I can agree with the Government: the explanatory notes state that limited infrastructure delivery is a real cost on the lives of working people. I completely agree. It is far too common for new housing to be built without the increase in public service capacity to match.

Joy Morrissey: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point on key infrastructure. Not only are we waiting for GP surgeries in my constituency, but we need a sewerage upgrade across my patch. We cannot even have new homes put in, because they cannot be attached to the sewerage system in its existing state. His point is valid: until infrastructure is put in place we cannot put homes in these new areas.

Lewis Cocking: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and she is right that infrastructure must come first. I will come on later in my speech to the fact that there is nothing in this Bill to make developers put that infrastructure in first.

In Broxbourne, we have already had more than our fair share of development. Thousands of new homes have been built in the past few years, but new or expanded infrastructure to take the strain off our already overstretched services is nowhere to be seen, and it is having a serious impact on my constituents. A Health Minister has admitted to me that patients trying to see their local GP in my constituency are more likely than the national average to wait two weeks. Drivers are forced to sit in traffic as roads clog up, and I hear time and again that parents are unable to get their child into the local school that they want.

The Bill before us seeks to make it easier to build major infrastructure. Of course I support building roads, airports and runways more quickly, but what the Government define as major infrastructure is way too narrow. Major infrastructure, to my constituents, is whether they can get a GP appointment or a school place. I see no mention of that in this Bill. There is nothing about providing new powers for local councils to ensure that that kind of infrastructure is in place before new housing is built.

I had to fight extremely hard to get the NHS round the table to say that we desperately need a new surgery to meet the demand from existing residents, but it would not listen to me—and now the Government are forcing us to build even more houses. In December, the Housing Minister said he was

“considering what more we can do to ensure that we get infrastructure for developments up front”.—[*Official Report*, 12 December 2024; Vol. 758, c. 1068.]

But where is that within the Bill? That is how to get existing residents on side and get people behind the new development that we desperately need in the right location. Local councillors are in fact having more of their powers over and responsibility for planning taken away, which dilutes local accountability and removes the voice of residents in deciding what is built in the local area. That is an attack on local democracy.

The Minister should be taking on developers, not local communities and councils. I have sat on a planning committee, and the reason the process is sometimes so long and—developers would argue—so onerous on the developers is that they try to build utter rubbish. Some of the stuff they put forward is utterly disgraceful. I would not want to live on some of the developments that they bring forward and try to get councillors to approve.

Of course we must have a robust process, because we need to focus more on urban design. Simply making it easier for developers to get through the planning system is putting way too much trust in developers to build appropriate communities, with all the infrastructure that our residents need.

Bradley Thomas: Does my hon. Friend agree that with regard to good-quality design, not only society but particularly the Government in their relationship with developers have to shift their mindset away from seeing design as a cost to instead seeing it as an investment that will reap benefits in the form of better-quality placemaking and better quality of life for residents?

Lewis Cocking: I know my hon. Friend is a passionate advocate for urban design, and he makes an important point. Of course we must invest in urban design, because it is the council—and MPs through our casework—that picks up the pieces. If a development is not planned correctly, with the right number of car spaces, for example, there are issues when people try to park their cars. Our inboxes get clogged up with all of those issues and the council is put under extra pressure with antisocial behaviour and so on.

We really have to think about planning the communities, rather than just saying, “Oh, we will give in to the developers—they say it takes too long, so we’ll make it quicker and just rely on them to create places that people want to live.” As I said, I have sat on a planning committee, and I have seen developments come forward that are utter rubbish. We need to change the mindset of developers, and we must ensure that we have good design. The Government are not seeking to change that; they are embracing it by committing to a target that can only be achieved by rushing the construction of low-quality homes with no plans for those who will live there. The Government need to focus more on the communities that we are trying to build within this country, rather than specific targets and house building across the country.

This Bill reveals that the Labour Government have their priorities wrong. Local people should have the largest influence over where new housing development goes and when it happens in their communities, not Ministers in Whitehall.

8.6 pm

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I am surprised to hear the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Lewis Cocking) trashing hard-working local builders in his constituency and calling the homes that his constituents live in dreadful trashy houses. Before I came to this place—

Lewis Cocking *rose*—

Rachel Taylor: I am not going to give way; you have had your time. Before I came to this place—[*Interruption.*]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I call Rachel Taylor.

Rachel Taylor: Before I came to this place—

Lewis Cocking: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wish to seek your advice. I have just been cited as saying something in my speech that I did not say. I was merely talking about developers and my time on the planning committee, when developers would come forward and propose utter rubbish. I did not say the houses my residents live in are rubbish.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Member has made his point. It is a matter of debate, but his point is now on the record.

Rachel Taylor: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—[HON. MEMBERS: “Withdraw!”]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I have made my ruling clear.

Rachel Taylor: Before I came to this place, I was a property solicitor, and I cannot say how many times I had developers in my office, swearing and cursing at yet another of their projects having been put on hold because of an arcane planning system. Bat tunnels are only the half of it.

I will never forget the day a developer told me that Warwickshire county council had asked him to build a pavement outside his new development but had then refused to let him put up traffic lights to enable the works because there was a vaccination centre a mile up the road. After months of legal wrangling, which delayed the home buyers moving in, the county council eventually gave in, but not before wasting everyone's time and resources.

There are already half a million fewer young homeowners since 2010, and millions are stuck in expensive, poor-quality and insecure rented housing. Despite that, planning permissions dropped to their lowest number on record under the last Government, because the planning system is outdated and no longer fit for purpose. I want my constituency to be a place where young people feel they can put down roots, whether in our towns or our villages, and I want to ensure that there is the necessary infrastructure for them and their young families to create a life in our towns and villages.

I welcome this Bill to fix our broken planning system and get Britain building again. As a solicitor, on many occasions I saw unacceptable delays in determining planning applications, which cost developers money. There were insufficient resources to deal with complex legal agreements or to consult in a meaningful way about necessary infrastructure. All too often, developers then bypassed the correct processes, only to end up with whole estates being built without key approvals, which have sat empty for more than 12 months because access on to the road has not yet been sorted. This Bill will properly fund planning departments, and I hope that that will extend to the associated legal work. It is rare that developers even go down the route of getting new roads adopted, because for them the delays that that causes are financial risks they cannot take, but that leads to more and more residents paying freehold management charges, which new homeowners can ill afford.

I am glad that the National Infrastructure Commission has welcomed the provisions in this Bill, calling them a "bold and broad-ranging package of measures".

After years of the Conservative party letting the planning system crumble, a bold approach is exactly what is needed. Just last week, I met those from National Grid in my constituency. They welcomed the Bill and said that this sort of sensible approach could not come soon enough.

Of course, it is crucial for us to get the balance right. Most people I have spoken to understand that if they want their kids to be able to afford a home and live nearby, we need to build more houses. I agree with the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, which has said that the Bill

"provides a necessary balance between the need to boost building developments, whilst protecting the natural world through a nature restoration fund, driving green initiatives."

It is vital we get this balance right. Every person should have access to an affordable home, and green and natural spaces they can use and enjoy.

Paul Holmes: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I appreciate being able to make this point of order. I would like to seek your guidance on the speech from the hon. Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor), in which she defended developers and also solicitors. Did she have to declare her interest as a practising solicitor, for which privilege she was paid £7,500 this quarter?

Rachel Taylor: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I no longer have a practising certificate as a solicitor, and I gave up practising as soon as I came into this House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, and I thank the hon. Lady for putting her clarification on the record.

8.11 pm

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): I speak as a former unitary authority councillor for over 17 years. In that time, I spoke many times on behalf of the local community at planning committee meetings, so I understand the importance of including communities in decisions. Shutting them out of the process breeds resentment about new developments, and this is the chance to take advantage of local knowledge to make sure those developments are of good quality.

I am proud that the council administration I led reversed the previous Conservative changes that gave one councillor the power to block applications heard by the planning committee, giving local people back their voice. I am therefore dismayed that this Government want to give the Secretary of State sweeping powers to enable planning decisions to bypass planning committees, and I urge them to look elsewhere to speed up delivery.

It is vital that infrastructure is provided ahead of development, and I would like to highlight a potentially more fruitful avenue for a Government who say that they want to tackle "blockers". Not only can organisations such as National Highways be slow to respond to planning consultations, on both individual applications and strategic plans, but when they do respond, the answer can be a simple no. Instead, we need all such bodies to see their role as one of working with local planning authorities to overcome the barriers and be enablers of growth. Junctions 16 and 17 of the M5 in my constituency are good examples of where joint working could deliver the infrastructure improvements we desperately need, for which residents in villages such as Easter Compton are crying out. That could also unlock growth.

On the subject of infrastructure, my constituency has great potential for national energy infrastructure, whether that is new small modular reactors at Oldbury or tidal lagoons. My hon. Friend the Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald) referred to the community benefit available from proposed transmission infrastructure, albeit he referred to its derisory levels. However, I would like to see this benefit extended to other energy infrastructure.

As a former council leader, I understand the pressure on budgets. I know that, under the current fees regime, council tax payers are paying significant amounts of money towards the planning determination process, rather than the cost falling on the applicants. I therefore welcome the provisions in the Bill to allow local planning authorities to set their own planning fees. However,

[Claire Young]

I would highlight the fact that there is room to help local authorities reduce costs. For example, local newspapers, with their dwindling circulations, are costly and ineffective routes for publicising applications, yet clause 84 only tweaks what needs to be published in those newspapers. I urge the Government to consider other ways to raise awareness, such as councils consulting local groups.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): The hon. Member has mentioned local newspapers. That money is a lifeline to local papers, and many people cherish their local paper as a way of finding out what is going on. I hear what she is saying, but let us not play too fast and loose with the money used to keep that lifeline going in many communities.

Claire Young: If the hon. Member would like his Government to support the future of local newspapers in that way, I hope they will look again at how they are supporting councils to fund local planning departments.

To conclude, I urge the Government to think again, tackle the real barriers to delivery and put local communities at the heart of the planning process.

8.15 pm

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): Like so much of the midlands, Erewash as we know and understand it today was born of the industrial revolution. Ilkeston was transformed from a historic market town to a place of hard, serious industry, and Long Eaton was scarcely a village before the coming of the canals and the railways. While the economy has changed, this Erewash of good jobs, thriving town centres and proper communities is still very much in living memory. At the heart of the east midlands—halfway between Derby and Nottingham—Erewash is now a place of immense potential. With this Bill, I believe we can unlock that potential, unleash prosperity, spur economic growth and help to deliver national renewal, creating the jobs and building the new homes that my constituents and this country need.

In Ilkeston, the old Stanton ironworks was a British industrial giant, employing nearly 10,000 people. Now, 20 years on from its closure, on the largest brownfield site in Derbyshire, New Stanton Park rises from the rubble. Every time I drive past, new work has been done on the park, and new jobs are already being created, but this restoration has taken too long. The planning process, with the immense costs, time and insecurity involved, has a serious, direct and negative impact on businesses' ability to grow.

Erewash has not met its housing targets since they were introduced in 2011—not once in the last 15 years. This problem is part of a decades-long national failure to build enough new homes, which has resulted in a housing crisis named by some as the worst in the developed world. As a result, the cost of buying a home has risen exponentially, rents are ever increasing and the average age of first-time buyers is rising consistently. From the peak, where homeowners represented more than 70% of the population just over 20 years ago, home ownership has fallen by nearly 10%.

Most disturbingly for me, Erewash borough council has a social housing waiting list of more than 5,000 people, or about 2,400 households. This is a staggering failure of the state. Recently, I had the pleasure of

showing my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury around 50 new social homes built on a brownfield site in Long Eaton. While this site represents excellent work by my council colleagues, it is not enough. Fifty new social homes is a droplet in the ocean when we have 2,000 families waiting to move in.

For too long, politicians locally and nationally have clung to stopgap measures, trying to treat the symptoms but falling short of a cure. Nobody is denying that people may not like it and that this is really difficult, but the solution is simple: we have to build more new homes. For the young families wanting to settle down, the renters tired of having so much of their hard-earned income paying their landlord's mortgage, and the 1.3 million households—not people, but households—on social waiting lists in England alone, we have a moral duty to build new homes.

This Bill is at the very heart of this Government's decade of national renewal. If we are going to make Britain a green energy superpower, we need to build the vital infrastructure that is required. If we want to take back our streets, break down the barriers to opportunity and build a national health service fit for the future, we need to unlock economic growth, so the Government have the money to properly invest in and restore public services. If we are going to put money back in people's pockets, we need to make it cheaper to buy a home, and if we are going to create the good jobs that people want and need, Britain needs to be a more attractive place to invest, grow and do business. To do all of that, we need to make it cheaper, faster and easier to build a better Britain.

8.19 pm

Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): Madam Deputy Speaker, you will know that I always like to start by emphasising where there is common ground and agreement, so that we can start off on a positive foot. I do agree that there is a housing crisis. I do agree that we need to build more homes. We need to tackle the outrageous inequality in the housing market and the fact that there are nearly 1 million empty homes, as well as 1.5 million for which there is planning permission but that are, as yet, unbuilt. We need to build more homes—the right home in the right place at the right price, though—and I am not sure the Bill goes far enough to address those concerns.

There are more areas of agreement. I agree we need to reform planning. I agree we need a strategic approach. I agree we need to tackle the issues of home value, community benefit from energy infrastructure, and planning fees—so many areas of agreement. [Interruption.] I can see the Minister is smiling. [Interruption.] No, I am not going to stop there; sorry!

However, there are a number of areas of missed opportunity, as well as fairly deep concern. Currently, the Bill has no content on a range of important planning aspects. It does not contain any measures to secure affordable, healthy homes, or to ensure that the planning system is fully joined up with our climate and nature obligations. There is not even a statement of a positive visionary purpose for the planning system, and it is so important to provide the framework for what we are doing here. We need clarification that development should be sustainable, benefiting future generations as well as meeting today's needs.

We need joined-up policy: a new climate and nature duty on all planning authorities to ensure that all policies tackle our Climate Change Act 2008 and Environment Act 2021 obligations. Planning is crucial for tackling the climate crisis and reducing the environmental impact of new development. We need solar panels on roofs and high levels of insulation. There is nothing here on zero-carbon heating or embodied carbon. There is also nothing on climate adaptation. I find it quite extraordinary that in 160 pages there is not a single mention of the words flood or flooding, yet they are crucial to planning and infrastructure. We need to ensure that the Bill plans for active and public transport. Let us see a “no net new traffic growth” test applied to all developments, so we incentivise the shift to active and public transport.

The Bill should include a nature duty. It provides a great opportunity to specify wildlife-friendly design, swift bricks—I have talked about them previously—hedgehog highways and green roofs. Let us have a new chapter of the building regulations specifically on biodiversity.

I recognise that environmental delivery plans could be useful in some cases, but I worry that they may be a bit too much of a blanket approach. What is suitable for newts is not necessarily suitable for all aspects of wildlife and landscape. I have a little concern that we are effectively outsourcing the environmental obligations of developers to Natural England, without requiring sufficient attention to be paid to those issues. For example, the removal of site-specific survey requirements means we will effectively be shooting in the dark when we specify what remedies need to be taken.

We need to legally guarantee that nature benefits will significantly outweigh any harm. We need to follow the mitigation hierarchy, strengthen protection for irreplaceable habitats such as the ancient woodlands and chalk streams that have been mentioned, and remove the viability test for the nature restoration levy. Otherwise, there is a real risk that developers will altogether escape paying for the nature restoration that they should do.

We need to ensure accessibility standards and affordability standards—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I call Joe Powell.

8.23 pm

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): Nothing symbolises the drift and decline of the past 14 years more than the appalling state of planning and infrastructure in Britain: a housing crisis that has forced children to live in overcrowded and unsafe homes; an energy crisis that has left us dangerously exposed to shocks in the global energy market; and a litany of infrastructure failures. It is not just the reservoirs or the £120 million spent on the Tory bat tunnel for HS2, but the promised 40 new hospitals by 2030—a claim now exposed as fiction with funds not allocated, many schemes not new hospitals, and a tiny fraction due to complete on time. I can see in my constituency the direct impact that that failure, especially on housing, has on my residents. I admire the commitment of the shadow Minister, who has just left his place, to the spreadsheet that he has been quoting from throughout the debate. He seems to have missed the line in the spreadsheet that states the number of times the previous Government hit their housing target—precisely zero.

There are nearly 3,000 people on the waiting list for social housing in the Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, and more than 2,000 in temporary accommodation. Behind those numbers are stories of daily struggle, like Sansha and her five children who live next to Grenfell Tower. Her son is in a wheelchair and awaiting open-heart surgery for his life-limiting condition. They live on the top floor, and the lift frequently breaks. There is no heating, no reliable hot water and just one working bathroom. They have been waiting more than three years for a move to a suitable property.

Then there is Lacey, whose six-year-old daughter has autism—and has tried to jump out of a window twice. Despite repeated safeguarding warnings, the family remains in overcrowded and unsafe housing. Then there is another resident I met recently who spent more than 15 years out of the borough with her children before moving back. There are more than 164,000 children living in temporary accommodation in England, the highest number on record. Instead of tackling the root causes, as the Bill seeks to do, we poured money into managing the problem.

Joy Morrissey: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point about temporary accommodation and the lack of housing availability. But why have the housing targets for London, which has some of the highest levels of unmet social housing accommodation need, not been raised to deal with overcrowding?

Joe Powell: I thank the hon. Lady for that point. The housing target for London is 88,000. She will know well that the previous target was never remotely close to being hit under the previous Government. With targets not being hit, we are interested in net new dwellings: affordable and social housing for the people I am most concerned about in my constituency. That is what the Bill will help to achieve.

I am delighted that we finally have a Government who have the ambition to tackle the problem. On energy, I am pleased that the Bill will deliver faster and more certain planning consent for critical infrastructure, including upgrading our electricity networks and maximising new clean energy sources. The Bill will move us on decisively from the era of the onshore wind ban, plummeting investment, and reliance on Putin and his fossil fuel oligarchs. If we are serious about speeding up delivery, however, we must address the capacity crisis in planning departments, so it is welcome that the Government have committed to 300 new planners. What assessment has been made of the total need for planners across the country to get to the level of approvals we need to meet our housing targets? Can the planning fee reform in the Bill support that recruitment through full cost recovery? We know that planning reform must be matched by the people and resources needed to make it work.

Nesil Caliskan: I thank my hon. Friend for his speech and for highlighting the gaps that exist in local government. I am sure he will recognise that, as the Local Government Association and the National Housing Federation have said, only 80% of local authorities have the capacity at the moment—in fact, it could be far less.¹ Does he agree that that is a real concern?

1. [Official Report, 2 April 2025; Vol. 765, c. 2WC.] (Correction)

Joe Powell: I could not agree more. That is why the devolution of fee setting is so important. It should enable an improvement in the capacity of planning departments and the training for councillors on planning committees to make those decisions effectively.

I also thank all the resident associations in my constituency who put time and effort into engaging in the planning system and who are passionate about making it work for our community. Their role will continue in the local plan and in applications that rise to the planning committee, contrary to some of the scaremongering we have heard in the debate.

The Bill sits alongside other crucial housing measures that the Government are taking, including the biggest investment in social and affordable housing in a generation, leasehold reform, stronger protection for renters, a new decent homes standard and the implementation of Awaab's law. If we are serious about tackling the housing crisis, this ambition must also be reflected in the comprehensive spending review—this is not just day-to-day spending, but long-term public investment. That is exactly why the Chancellor took the bold decisions in the Budget to increase the capital available for investment and reverse more than a decade of under-investment and short-termism. I would therefore welcome any clarification from the Minister on the total investment in the CSR needed to meet our housing targets, in particular on the affordable and social component.

Advancing the Bill alongside new investment in the CSR could be transformative. We owe it to the constituents I mentioned earlier—to Sansha, Lacey and the thousands of children trapped in unsuitable and unsafe housing—to get this right. It will be a landmark legacy of this Labour Government to finally get Britain building again.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am going to try to get everybody in. If interventions are taken, some people are going to lose out on being called to speak. Please keep that in mind.

8.30 pm

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): The aspect of the Bill I would like to focus on is the nationally significant infrastructure project reform. This Labour Government claim that their reforms will make “targeted and impactful interventions to the consenting system,” but that will come as scant consolation to the local residents on the receiving end of the projects being foisted upon them. Having fought for my constituents against a solar NSIP, I know how difficult it will be to navigate for the average person, and the Government appear determined to make it even harder.

The Government are moving the goalposts to reach their ideological aims, and it is my constituents who are paying the price without being heard. They are receiving nothing in the way of direct compensation as a result—no firm commitment to cheaper energy bills, with the Government only assessing zonal pricing, and no firm commitment to ensuring that community benefit funds appropriately compensate local communities.

This Labour Government have already forced through six solar NSIPs since July, compared with just three under the previous Government. The largest of the three approved by the Conservatives was 1,200 acres; the smallest solar farm approved by this Government is

1,300 acres, while the largest, so far, is 2,800 acres. The current threshold for solar development to qualify as an NSIP is only 50 MW, which has been the case since 2008. While the Government have legislated to raise the existing solar threshold from 50 MW to 100 MW, it is still a laughably low bar. Point 2.10.17 of national policy statement EN-3 clearly states that

“a solar farm requires between 2 to 4 acres for each MW of output.”

Such a low threshold will potentially allow hundreds of acres of good-quality farmland to be brought into scope.

Cambridgeshire is seen as a target-rich environment by the Government. We have already seen the Sunnica energy farm approved in the east of the county, and now East Park solar farm has been proposed in my constituency on an excessive scale—it is bigger than Gatwick airport, at 1,900 acres and spanning six miles. Nearly 75% of the site is graded as best and most versatile land.

In answer to a written question about how many consented nationally significant infrastructure projects use greater than 50% best and most versatile land. I was told by the Energy Minister, the hon. Member for Rutherglen (Michael Shanks), who is in his place, that

“no nationally significant infrastructure projects have been consented which will use greater than 50% best and most versatile agricultural land.”

Last week, when I challenged the Secretary of State on the same point, quoting point 5.11.34 of the national policy statement—that he should

“ensure that applicants do not site their scheme on the best and most versatile agricultural land without justification”—

he suggested that

“the decision makers will be looking closely at the issues”—[*Official Report*, 18 March 2025; Vol. 764, c. 164.]

But will they?

The Government have pledged to achieve a target. They have moved the goalposts to make that target easier to achieve and stacked the deck in their favour at the expense of local residents, suggesting that achieving the goal

“is going to require our NSIP system to be firing on all cylinders.”

The Government will remove the requirement to consult category 3 people, who would be able to make a claim under the Compulsory Purchase Act 1965, while maintaining the requirement for notification at the acceptance stage. The first that residents will know about land being taken from them is after an application has already been accepted.

The illusion of statutory consultation appears to be nothing more than lip service. For all the questions I have asked—written questions, oral questions—I have not once heard a response from the Government that the views of local people will be taken into account nor explaining how the highest-graded land will be protected from development. I note that in her opening speech, the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government said that the Government would be protecting agricultural land, but gave no detail on that. I would be interested to hear what the Government are going to do.

It is particularly telling that the forthcoming solar road map will not break cover until after the Bill has progressed. Yet again, it appears that this Government will do anything to achieve their plan for change without any thought to the consequences of said change.

The Bill requires the national policy statements to be updated every five years, but those providing policy guidance on energy infrastructure were last published in January 2024. Although that should mean they will not be updated again until 2029, the Bill proposes that Parliament can make changes to the NPSs outside the rhythm of those updates. Given the clear desire of the Government to force through NSIPs wherever possible, my concern is that they are being given a window of opportunity to implement rolling tweaks in order to manipulate the NSIP process to better suit their own agenda.

8.33 pm

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): I rise to speak about how the Bill will allow us to invest in our communities, benefiting every part of the country and not just London.

I have spent my entire adult life in a no-growth economy where costs rose because we did not build enough. The rent we pay, our rail fares and our energy bills have all soared because we could not build the homes, rail or wind farms we need—higher costs caused by a planning system whose default answer is no. The Bill changes that answer to yes.

The Bill targets constraints that have stopped us from growing. Prices are information. Where prices are high, we can see that we desperately need more supply. Rents as a share of income are up by 20% since 2020. Our transport costs are 26% higher than in peer nations. When Putin invaded Ukraine, we had the highest electricity bills in the G7. What do these prices tell us? Not enough homes, not enough rail, and not enough clean energy.

Infrastructure is being held back by our broken planning system. Our infrastructure projects are among the most expensive and slow to build of high-income nations. The Bill lifts the constraints and helps get us building, but it can go further. The NIC states that the largest increase to planning timetables is at pre-application stage, adding over two years on average. It is delaying critical infrastructure. I hope that the Minister will address this in his remarks.

We must also ensure that the benefits of the Bill are felt across our nation. My constituency is in the east midlands, where transport spending is the lowest in the country, private rents are rising faster than anywhere else, and productivity is the lowest in England. That is why it is harder to get a good job. For too long, investment has flowed to London and the south-east. That is because the benefit-cost ratio in the Green Book has a hardwired London bias. Wages are higher in London, so the estimated benefits of spending are also larger in the capital. With more projects built here in London, the logic becomes self-fulfilling. That London bias is why the gap between London and the rest of the UK is larger than the gap between west and east Germany. The Treasury, to its credit, does understand the problem, but the tyranny of the benefit-cost ratio is sadly still with us. We must end this bias and build prosperity in the places that need it most.

The Opposition spoke about levelling up but did nothing to deliver it. The Leeds tram, upgrading the line from Cardiff to Swansea, electrifying the midland main line—all were rejected by the last Government, who put London first and everywhere else last. They spoke of levelling up, but as my dad likes to say, talk is cheap.

Now is the time to stop talking and start building. That means fixing the planning system so that we can build the homes, wind farms and, yes, pylons that we need. If we change our approach to infrastructure projects, we can also build the roads and rail we need outside of London, making it easier to transport goods and for my constituents in Loughborough, Shepshed and the villages to get around.

8.37 pm

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): I am pleased that the great majority of the Bill will not affect me or my constituents, but I will speak briefly to the areas that do, beginning with clauses 9 to 13 on electricity network connection reform. I acknowledge that the first come, first served debacle has served the development and drawdown of these schemes very poorly, but I simply ask the Minister: when will the regime materially change such that properly consented, properly financed projects, which are behind projects that are not either of those things, can get their connections approved?

In clause 14 on consents for generating stations and overhead lines, the amendment to the Electricity Act 1989 makes it clear that consenting to electricity infrastructure in Scotland is carried out by Scottish Ministers, not the Secretary of State. That is all well and good, but under clause 16 appeals would need to be made within six weeks of a decision being published, with challenges made to the inner house of the Court of Session in Edinburgh—that is all fine—but with a route to appeal to the Supreme Court in the United Kingdom. Can the Minister confirm that the final arbiter of any disputes over consents for generating stations and overhead lines will be here in London?

Clause 21 addresses the cap and floor mechanism, which I have mentioned to the Energy Minister, the hon. Member for Rutherglen (Michael Shanks), who I am touched to see has come in for my contribution. The cap and floor mechanism for long-duration electricity storage is vital for Drax's plans for Cruachan and SSE's plans for Coire Glas in Scotland. That they are track 2 and track 3 projects gives me some concern. Can we have some reassurance that the 2030 deliverable projects will be facilitated without delay by the ambition of those clauses?

Clause 22 on benefits for homes near electricity transmission projects is bordering on insulting. If the utility and value of someone's home and area have been significantly impinged by the erection of a pylon nearby, £20.83 a month off their electricity bill will not ameliorate that. It is referred to as a financial support scheme—the implication being that people need financial support. They do not need it. Ministers should call it what it is: compensation for the imposition of electrical infrastructure. In all reality, a community has very little say over whether that happens at all.

That £20.83 a month off their electricity bill will be precious little compensation for people who have been mired in the planning process of a pylon or any other generating infrastructure, who have not been able to sell their property for the last two years and will not be able to sell it for the coming two years either. I am not saying that this infrastructure should not be built, but the Government should not insult people's intelligence with vastly less money than they took off them when they ended the winter fuel payment.

John Lamont: The hon. Member is making an excellent point—it is a rare moment of unity between him and me. I agree that the compensation is not enough. Does he agree that part of the problem is that the developer—in our case, Scottish Power Energy Networks, which is building the pylons across my constituency—assumes that it will get consent and approval, so it pushes ahead and the compensation does not really matter?

Dave Doogan: I agree that the compensation is risible. Many people in the hon. Member's constituency and mine who are subject to these installations are pretty much resigned, because no matter what they do or say, it will happen. Will the Minister confirm that where constituents are subject to multiple developments, that £250 a year will be cumulative per imposition on their property? Why is it limited to 10 years? Will the developers come and take the pylons away in 10 years?

In the ambitions that are represented by clause 22, people will see the very minimum that the Government can do while acknowledging that this infrastructure is an imposition. It is not reasonable that people should have a 10-year miserly compensation for a lifetime's imposition on their home. With that, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will grant you 30 seconds for somebody else.

8.42 pm

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I welcome the Bill, which reflects the priorities of a responsible Government committed to tackling the housing crisis and driving regeneration, jobs, apprenticeships and investment while protecting our precious green spaces and green belt. The Bill will usher in a new era of house building—a long-standing issue that successive Governments failed to address, but that this Labour Government will tackle head-on with exciting projects in my constituency.

Constituents in Wolverhampton North East know the importance of building more homes. It is the No. 1 emergency in my inbox. Nearly 8,000 residents are on Wolverhampton council's housing waiting list, with only 260 properties becoming available each month. Nearly 20% of 25 to 34-year-olds in the UK are living with their parents, making it harder for young people to find the right time to start their own family. Every day I hear from families who are struggling to find a place to call home, renters stuck in poor conditions and young people wondering if they will ever have the chance to own their own home. The status quo is failing, and it is clear that we need change, but let me be equally clear that my constituents know that these must be the right homes in the right places. That means genuinely affordable housing alongside the infrastructure to support it. New homes must also mean new GP surgeries, school places and transport infrastructure. Communities cannot and should not be left to cope without the services they rely on.

In Wolverhampton North East, we are seeing great examples of just that. Canalside South is set to regenerate 17.5 acres of former industrial wasteland near Wolverhampton city centre. Having lain derelict for over 15 years, this brownfield site will be transformed into 530 energy-efficient homes. The new Park Village redevelopment is replacing 205 outdated, poor-quality maisonettes with modern two, three and four-bedroom homes, transforming the project for our community.

The Bill is a bold and necessary step towards addressing the housing crisis, supporting economic growth and investing in our communities. It strikes the right balance, delivering affordable, high-quality homes where they are needed most while protecting our green spaces and ensuring that infrastructure keeps pace with development. This is the action of a responsible Government delivering on their promises for the people we serve. I support the Bill, knowing that it will provide security and hope to countless families in my constituency and across the country.

8.46 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Housing and homes matter, but so too do democracy, accountability and, really importantly, local communities and the local environment, yet the Bill scales back the ability of every planning committee in the country and reduces council involvement in decision making in its local authorities and wards. It creates a major democratic deficit, with councillors unable to have a voice or a say when deciding on a development. This is classic top-down socialism from a Secretary of State who has herself protested to local councillors in her constituency to oppose developments.

From the outset, the Bill aims to expedite development, but we must not allow that to come at the expense of our green belt and the wildlife that it protects, because, once lost, those spaces will be gone forever. There is growing discussion and concern about the so-called grey belt—the piecemeal erosion of our green belt—which risks setting a dangerous precedent. Surely the focus should be on a genuine brownfield-first strategy, unlocking underutilised urban land before reaching for our green spaces. I urge the Government to strengthen the Bill by putting green belt protection and nature at the heart of planning and ensuring that the pursuit of growth never comes at the cost of our environment and communities.

The top-down approach to housing targets, which has been embodied by the Government, is a disgrace, and it places additional pressure on boroughs like Walsall, which is being asked to do the heavy lifting for areas such as Birmingham. The Government have insisted that housing targets for Walsall rise by an eye-watering additional 27%, while housing targets in Birmingham are reduced by nearly half. I could say that that may be because of the trash currently in Labour-led Birmingham and mention the squeaky blinders, but I will avoid doing so today.

The Bill does little to prioritise the regeneration of our town centres and our high streets. There is no clear strategy to unlock urban brownfield sites at scale. There are pub sites crying out for development. Nor is there the necessary investment to make high street renewal a reality. Let us be clear: a brownfield-first strategy requires more than warm words; it needs real funding and a clear plan. The Bill lacks both. Brownfield sites often require remediation, yet there is no meaningful financial support to bring them back into use. We have seen it work in the west midlands at the Caparo site in Walsall under the work of our previous mayor, Andy Street.

Another area that the Bill fails to address is the 1 million planning consents for new homes in this country. Not one of those proposed new build properties will ever get built if the Bill simply makes it easier for developers to drive a coach and horses through our green belt. Placemaking must go hand in hand with infrastructure—

Robbie Moore: Does my right hon. Friend not realise that, in addition to placemaking, this is about making sure that infrastructure is at the heart of any new development, so that those who move into new places have GP practices, doctors surgeries and other facilities available to them?

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend is absolutely spot on. Placemaking has to go hand in hand with infrastructure to make sure that there are additional school places and doctors surgeries to support the new homes. Employment and transport also matter. Otherwise, all we are doing is clogging up our transport systems and roads, and frustrating our local communities.

What is the Bill actually doing to address the need to create and foster new communities? That is what it should be doing, but I think it is really missing an opportunity. Few in this House would say that we do not need homes. Homes need to be part of communities, but in its current format, I fear that the Bill is a developer's dream. It is also a neighbourhood nightmare, because it does nothing to create resilient and sustainable communities where individuals where families can grow up and thrive. That is what we should be seeking to address through big pieces of legislation like this. In short, there are some good things in the Bill, but it is a missed opportunity.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. The speaking limit is now three minutes. I call Amanda Martin.

8.51 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): On behalf of so many of my constituents, builders and construction companies in Portsmouth North who are desperately waiting for the chance to have a home and build those homes, I rise today to express my wholehearted support for this Planning and Infrastructure Bill. It is both timely and essential for providing the affordable housing so desperately needed in Portsmouth. The Bill represents a decisive step forward, unlocking our planning system and propelling Britain into a new era of construction and development alongside nature recovery.

The housing crisis has been a persistent challenge, with many families struggling to find affordable homes in my city for far too long. The Bill aims to facilitate the construction of 1.5 million new homes by 2030, streamlining decision-making processes and ensuring that development moves swiftly. Under the last Government, we lost far too much time and wasted far too much money. By granting councils and Mayors greater authority to seize land for affordable homes, we are removing the bureaucratic burdens that have long impeded progress and stopped the building of much-needed homes.

While I commend the Government's commitment to infrastructure development, it is imperative that we scrutinise the projects that receive national significant infrastructure project status. A case in point is the proposed Aquind interconnector project, which would, if approved, run through my constituency of Portsmouth North. The project faces huge opposition for several reasons, including environmental concerns and years of mass disruption, but this is not nimbyism. The project also faces opposition because of the national security

risks identified by the Ministry of Defence due to the interconnector's location near the Portsmouth naval base.

Another reason that this project's proposal is difficult is the murky financials behind Aquind and the manner in which the national significant infrastructure project status was obtained. Aquind is owned by a former Russian oil boss who has faced allegations and accusations of corruption and misconduct, and the co-owners have also made many substantial donations to the Conservative party, raising questions around the impartiality of the approval process in 2018 under the last Government. As I have said, the Planning and Infrastructure Bill is a welcome and monumental stride towards resolving our housing crisis, but this Government must remain vigilant to ensure that the processes governing infrastructure projects are transparent, equitable and free from undue influence.

8.54 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): Our planning system is critical and should protect against inappropriate development, including on the green belt and flood plains. It needs to protect and enhance biodiversity, and it needs local democratic and community input. Rather than dictating to communities, the Government should work with them. We need not only houses but homes, and that means infrastructure, roads, schools, health services and sewers. Whether through "infrastructure first" or making them all statutory consultees, it has to work. Planning enforcement must also work, but it is an ongoing issue in my patch despite recent changes and improvements.

On the changes proposed to the NSIP system and development consent orders, I will speak about the experience in my constituency because we have had DCO complete, have one ongoing and hope to have one in the future. I will start with the one that has finished, which is the Esso pipeline project. It ended up blocking access to homes and ripping up green spaces, with poor communication and no compensation to the residents affected. When I asked for compensation, the answer was, "Well, it's not in the DCO." Reform must ensure greater protections for communities affected by a DCO project.

The M25/A3 DCO, which many Members will know about because of the M25 closures, one of which over the weekend, is a fantastic project that will improve local connectivity, but it has wreaked havoc through diversion routes and problems at the Painshill roundabout, which National Highways admitted was deprioritised in favour of the works. It has caused problems with kids getting to school and to their exams. When I tried to raise this to get enforcement, including through, among others, the Office of Rail and Road, no formal investigation was even opened, and it has been pretty much impossible to find a meaningful way to get enforcement when things go wrong.

We hope to have—we must have—a DCO in the future with the River Thames scheme, which will massively reduce my constituents' flood risk and make it far less likely that we see a repeat of the impact of the 2014 floods. We have had countless rounds of consultation. I am concerned that, because of the current system, perfect has become the enemy of the good, and I am worried about the problems with local council reform and the impact they will have. Will the Minister in his

[Dr Ben Spencer]

wind-up explain and give advice to people putting together a DCO as to what they should do given the Bill's impact when it gets Royal Assent?

8.57 pm

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in support of this much-needed Bill to get Britain building infrastructure again. Dartford—the constituency I have the privilege to represent in this place—can serve as a poster child for the need for this Bill in its struggle to see the hugely needed lower Thames crossing built. Our community is regularly gridlocked by traffic because of the over-capacity Dartford crossing, creating near daily misery for residents. The unreliability at Dartford also acts as a significant blocker on UK growth, with huge costs through delays calculated at £200 million each and every year.

The commentator Tom Whipple recently highlighted in *The Times*:

“Some 36 years ago—or to put it another way, 22 transport secretaries ago—the words ‘Lower Thames Crossing’ first appear in the parliamentary record.”

It has been eight years since the former Transport Secretary, who is now in the other place, confirmed the route. Since April 2017, National Highways has run eight separate consultations, consulting for more than 400 days. The planning application eventually ballooned to 400,000 pages. Many years on, we look forward to a positive decision from the Department for Transport in May—a Labour Government finally delivering on a much-needed infrastructure project for the people of Dartford.

We cannot continue to face crucial national infrastructure taking this long to reach a decision. It is essential that we can deliver new infrastructure if we are to modernise our country, deliver services and unlock growth. We need a clearer system that has a degree of predictability for all participants, and that can move at pace while providing the right opportunities for local people to influence plans for the neighbourhoods in which they live. Part of the reason that so many consultations were needed for the proposed lower Thames crossing was the number of opportunities for judicial review. I warmly welcome the measures in the Bill to reduce such opportunities, which will ensure that cases totally without merit do not proceed.

Before I end my remarks, let me welcome the measures on nationally significant infrastructure projects. Big-ticket items are delayed again and again, leaving our constituents paying the price in higher energy bills, and in the case of the lower Thames crossing, leaving my constituents paying the price in congested roads. I encourage Ministers to think about—and perhaps to address in the wind-up—whether the Bill can be strengthened even further to speed up and streamline the process of getting critical infrastructure projects built faster, for all our sakes.

9 pm

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I have reservations about whether the Bill will achieve its aims. Somerset faces a significant need for more homes, particularly social and affordable housing, especially in rural areas. It is crucial that local communities such as

those in Glastonbury and Somerton have a strong voice and a real stake in the process of shaping the places where they live, so I share my Liberal Democrat colleagues' concerns that the Government's overly centralised, developer-led approach will not mandate the nature-friendly planning considerations needed to protect our environment or deliver sustainable development, infrastructure and housing in a way that meets the needs of local communities. It will exclude them from decisions that they should be involved in.

The Bill looks to introduce the nature restoration levy requiring developers to meet environmental obligations related to protected sites and species, but I fear that Natural England, which is mandated with overseeing that, might lack the resource, expertise and budget to properly monitor and enforce the nature recovery fund. In addition, those new measures must not place additional unfunded burdens on councils. Local authorities must be fully involved in their implementation to ensure that they deliver meaningful outcomes for communities and for the environment. We must ensure that homes do not come at the expense of nature.

I am worried that the legislation fails to do enough to protect rare species such as the great crested newt, which can be found in Glastonbury and Somerton at Lytes Cary Manor and at the aptly named “The Newt” in Castle Cary. The Government's manifesto pledged to make changes to the planning system to create places that increased climate resilience and promote nature recovery, but the Bill lacks the detail needed to really protect and support nature. Instead, requirements are supplanted by undefined improvement assessments. Planning should support integration between nature, new homes, agriculture and environment, including by achieving nature recovery and biodiversity by design.

The Bill also lacks a binding commitment to the land use framework to determine the balance between food production and infrastructure creation. That is a missed opportunity to ensure that farmers can improve food security and biodiversity, and climate change mitigation is protected. The family farm tax and the decision to close the sustainable farming incentive without notice will threaten the viability of farms in Glastonbury and Somerton and up and down the country. Farmers will play a key role in achieving many of the Bill's ambitions, and it could have supported the long-term sustainability of their businesses to allow them to optimise their land for multiple purposes and to improve profitability, but sadly that is not the case.

9.3 pm

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): Every week in my constituency surgery, families turn up with shocking stories of living in overcrowded rented homes. They show me photos of mould covering the walls, of four bunk beds crammed into one tiny room for the whole family, of the space on the kitchen floor where the parents sleep so the kids can have the sofa.

In Southall and West Ealing, I see people sleeping rough in all weathers. That is the human cost of 14 years of the Conservative Government's ideological decision to halt Labour's affordable homes programme and to push people into the more expensive and largely unregulated private rented sector. The Conservatives left over 100,000 families in temporary accommodation—the highest figure since records began.

The previous Government have a lot to answer for—I will not go through it all now—but we need to start working on solutions. The solution to the housing crisis is simple: we need to build more homes and the energy, transport and public services infrastructure to support them. This Bill will put an end to the previous Government's dither and delay, and will start to get shovels in the ground and children in Ealing Southall off the living room floor. Labour-run Ealing council already has one of the most ambitious affordable housing programmes in the country, but with more than 5,000 families on the waiting list for a home, it needs more help to make schemes add up financially. I hope that the Minister will consider the specific barriers to building affordable homes in London, and how councils can be supported in that.

There is much that can be learned from London, where 98% of planning decisions are already delegated to expert officers. Ealing has one of the best planning teams in the country, which was awarded platinum by *Planning* magazine. It is the top London borough for on-time decisions on major applications, and has the lowest percentage overturned at appeal, showing that it is getting decisions right. Ealing also has a local plan, based on comprehensive local consultation, which is used to guide good quality planning applications. The Bill will help to spread good practice from places such as Ealing, and ensure that councils across the country can take a more consistent streamlined approach to planning applications and bring back strategic planning as there is in London.

I welcome mandatory training for members of the planning committees. We will have to look at that in London, so that it is regionally tailored for the London plan. Ensuring that councils can charge the full cost of planning decisions is welcome—let us have developers paying that, not council tax payers. Finally, the new nature restoration levy will allow for bigger and more effective environmental improvements, such as Ealing's new regional park.

The Conservative party did not believe in affordable homes, but this Bill will back the builders, not the blockers, and again allow us to start building the homes and local services that people need.

9.6 pm

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): I appreciate the Government's intention to speed up the planning and development process to build the clean infrastructure that we need, but we should not be rushing through such a huge Bill, given its impact on our communities. Currently, under the Planning Act 2008, applications for development consent orders on nationally significant infrastructure projects must include a consultation report that sets out requirements to ensure that that has been carried out robustly. However, clause 4 weakens those requirements, and under the changes, the report will need only to summarise relevant responses and outline any changes made as a result. Summarising is a dangerous game, and I do not believe that summaries have any place in decisions of national significance. I am particularly concerned about the impact that that measure could have on Welsh language considerations, environmental concerns and the voice of local people.

When it comes to the Welsh language, there is already a lack of consistency in assessing the impact of developments. The Bill may exacerbate that problem

and weaken protections for the language. Concerns raised by communities about environmental impacts could be reduced to a handful of bullet points in a summary. I welcome the Government's recognition that households living near new transmission developments are affected negatively, but that should go much further than the current proposals.

Why is that principle not extended to large-scale energy developments? For example, the proposed Maen Hir project on Ynys Môn will cover over 3,000 acres of the island's land. Large solar farms are built on agricultural land and frequently sold to communities with the promise of economic benefit. However, replacing agricultural industry with huge solar farms will negatively impact the local economy. I recognise the need to improve our energy security, and to do that the Government should be focusing on innovative solutions to roll out new infrastructure such as undergrounding cables, and promoting rooftop solar.

In conclusion, I urge the Government not to rush the Bill, because it must give confidence to businesses and local communities, and it must also lay the ground for a more coherent and strategic approach to ensure that developments are fit for future generations.

9.8 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for recognising the urgent need for the delivery of new homes and critical infrastructure, and I welcome the plan for 1.5 million new safe and decent homes by the end of this Parliament. My constituency is in desperate need of affordable homes to rent, and of one day people being able to own their own home.

Planning should be a powerful lever to tackle nature loss and climate change, as well as meeting housing and low-carbon infrastructure needs. For the Government to meet their nature and climate targets, the planning system needs to integrate nature recovery alongside development. A new nature and climate duty on all planning authorities should require planning policy decisions to contribute to meeting our climate and nature targets.

We cannot let developers avoid responsibility for biodiversity net gain simply by paying into the nature restoration fund, banking money that may never be spent on nature. We cannot let them see it as just the cost of doing business.

The fund offers no guarantee that the populations of protected species will be replaced. According to an analysis by NatureSpace, protected species have limited impact on development. More importantly, existing schemes, such as district licensing, already accelerate development by shaving months from planning applications. We need to promote existing schemes better. We should acknowledge that the nature restoration fund and environment delivery plans will take years to set up. It is within the Bill's scope to give the Forestry Commission a nature duty. With a nature remit, the Forestry Commission could give greater weight to habitat recovery in the woodlands it manages. The Bill offers a prime legislative opportunity to introduce promised reforms to national parks and landscapes. It should introduce a nature recovery purpose for protected landscapes and institute the promised governance reforms.

In my constituency in Leeds, we are doing our fair share. Leeds city centre is planned to grow by 50,000 homes in the next decade. However, we are at crisis point with

[Alex Sobel]

27,000 on the council and housing association waiting lists, and 7,000 in the highest priority banding. They are now waiting for three years to get a home.

As it stands, funding for local authorities is not fluid enough and settlements are not long enough. Councils need to be self-sufficient if rents are to cover maintenance and replenishment of stock. A big part of the solution is to re-implement grant funding targeted at property additionality, with a long-term approach to funding to unlock additional opportunities. Housing investment should be reclassified as infrastructure to support not only the efficient and effective use of funding, but in recognition of a decent home being the foundation of lives and productivity for an individual and the wider economy.

I am asking us to marry the understanding that, when listening to community and ecological experts, environmental law need not be a blocker of development, but an enabler of nature restoration, sustainable development and everyone's access to green space, with the understanding that housing and social housing are infrastructure for our local authorities to build and structure our communities for the future. Will the Minister meet me to discuss that, as he kindly did about the Renters (Reform) Bill?

9.11 pm

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): House building is essential to provide the homes that people need, but there are significant problems with our current approach to planning, and it is therefore welcome that the Government are giving time and attention to those topics.

My constituency and the areas surrounding it have seen 35% population growth in 20 years, yet the housing that has been built meets only some needs. South Oxfordshire housing association analysis highlights a serious shortage of social and affordable housing, particularly for one or two-person people households.

I have personally experienced the challenge of finding suitable and/or affordable housing, with very little to rent that is furnished. I appreciate that very few small violins will be played, but even as an MP on my salary, the place I have recently bought is wildly expensive, at nearly £300,000 for a small, two-bedroomed terraced house. In my case, building new housing has freed up an older house for me to buy, but the current market is not delivering for people on lower incomes.

Between 2012 and 2021, the Vale of White Horse local authority had the third highest net increase in dwellings as a proportion of their starting stock. I am proud that Liberal Democrat-led Vale and South Oxfordshire district councils have been proactive in developing a joint local plan, which has successfully combined meeting housing targets and five-year land supply requirements with gaining significant stakeholder support, for example from the Campaign to Protect Rural England.

The councils' innovative and inclusive approach to consultation with the public meant that they were shortlisted for three national awards. They ran three stages of consultation to encourage as much engagement as possible. More than 5,000 responses were received from residents, parish councils and local businesses.

A key concern for my constituency is how any further increase in housing can be accommodated, given the dominance of lack of investment in infrastructure in recent years, leading to local concern about further housing. We need targets and measures for infrastructure, as well as housing, particularly given that local authorities do not have the powers or funding to deliver health and major transport schemes. The Bill does not remedy that.

Luke Taylor: My hon. Friend mentioned the capex costs of the infrastructure. Is it not also important that local councils and NHS integrated care boards are given increased budgets to maintain staffing for those facilities? There is no point in building a GP surgery if it cannot be staffed.

Olly Glover: My hon. Friend is right. Buildings need to be staffed, otherwise we will end up like the episode of "Yes Minister" with an empty building.

Key infrastructure needs and asks for my constituency include the Didcot-Culham relief road, with better walking and cycling provision than in the current plan. It is a controversial scheme, but I have given it my backing. They also include walking and cycling investment in new and existing areas of the towns; a new railway station at Grove; Didcot to Oxford line electrification; and health capacity to keep up with our growing population, particularly a GP surgery at Great Western Park in Didcot. That is why it is so critical that we link housing targets to targets and measures for wider infrastructure. Communities need housing, but they also need all the accompanying public and private amenities and services that are essential for happy and well-functioning communities.

9.14 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Many colleagues in the House will know that I love talking about education, but this Bill gives me the opportunity to talk about something even closer to my heart than that. No, it is not "Neighbours"; it is my home of Harlow.

Harlow is a post-war new town. It may not have been the first or the most successful—certainly not at football—but I argue that it is the one with the most heart. The principles that underpinned Harlow were about community and a collective identity. Despite its challenges, I believe that that sense of community shines through today. I welcome the Bill's recognition of the importance of development corporations, and I urge the Minister to look at the not-so-new towns of Stevenage and Harlow—the one I have the honour to call my home and to represent in this place.

If we speak to some residents of Harlow—the more experienced residents, let us say—they will talk with great fondness about the Harlow development corporation. I will take a moment to recognise those new-town pioneers: they were people who made sure that they got things done. I also pay tribute to one of my predecessors in this place, Leah Manning, for her vision of what Harlow could be. We still have the Leah Manning centre, which cares for some of those more experienced residents.

I welcome the commitment to strengthen the link between the development corporations and local transport authorities, as that connectivity is vital. However, I also draw the Minister's attention to Harlow's neighbourhood centres, such as Bush Fair and the Stow. Before the idea

of the 15-minute city was mooted—and, I believe, misunderstood by some people—Sir Frederick Gibberd recognised the need for every neighbourhood to have a sense of identity, a shopping centre, a central point to meet, a work of art or two, a park and our infamous green wedges, which mean that people can get from one end of Harlow to the other without ever needing to go on a road.

No one will know better about the issue of land banking than the people of Harlow. Huge swathes of our town centre are no-go zones, left in a state of decay. Abandoned buildings have been left to rot or to become a refuge for those outside the law. That needs to change, and I believe that this legislation will help with that. Contrary to misleading reports, this Bill is not about targeting landowners. Nothing in the Bill changes the core principle of compulsory purchase, but it must be used only when negotiations have not succeeded and where there is a compelling case in the public interest.

I welcome the Government's ongoing commitment to build the homes we need. As someone who has worked in the charity sector for a homelessness charity, I know as much as anyone how much they are needed. For every resident who complains about a new housing development, I speak to five other residents who live in overcrowded and unsuitable accommodation or face the risk of homelessness.

9.17 pm

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): I am delighted that the Deputy Prime Minister has arrived in time to hear my speech. I do not question her sincerity and intention, or that of the Planning Minister, regarding the legislation or the planning changes introduced in the revised national planning policy framework. My concern is whether they will actually deliver the 1.5 million target, and I sincerely doubt that they will. As with previous Governments—this is not unique to the present Government—the methodology of the housing targets is based on a delusion that private developers will collude with the Government to drive down the price of their finished product.

The constituency I represent is in Cornwall, and I worked in this sector during my nine-year sabbatical from this place. In places such as Cornwall, we have met targets—indeed, we have exceeded them. We have more than trebled the housing supply, yet local people's housing problems have got significantly worse. There has been an increase in the number of second homes. The previous Government have handed out £500 million of taxpayers' money to holiday homeowners in the last 10 years, when only half that amount has been put into first homes for local people.

We need targets that are based on delivering what communities need. The problem is that our targets are a means to an end, and building homes does not necessarily mean that we meet the need. If those targets were the end, rather than the means—in other words, if we were setting targets that were about reducing need, rather than simply filling developers' pockets—those of us in Cornwall, and no doubt in the rest of the country, would be in a far better place. I hope that Ministers will look at this issue again and allow areas that have struggled in the past to set targets that address need, rather than developers' greed. These are not nimby territories; they want to meet that need.

The hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) mentioned the rural exceptions policy, which is a very good policy that could be developed further. Rather than being the exception, it should be a planning norm in many rural areas in order to deliver their need. Compensation for nature loss, which is dealt with in clause 55, needs to be strengthened—a lot of nature charities are very worried about that. Finally, part 5 of the Bill, which deals with compulsory purchase, needs to be built up to stand behind this. I would like the Government to develop that part of the Bill further.

9.20 pm

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): Britain finds itself in a chokehold, with bottlenecks leaving it unable to update its infrastructure to a modern standard. Part of the story behind that is the last Government's inertia and infighting, which came at the expense of the national interest. *[Interruption.]* I hear that I have some musical accompaniment. The time that it takes to secure planning permission for major infrastructure has almost doubled over the past decade. That has real-world consequences, including higher bills, longer commutes, increased water shortages and flooding—I could go on.

It is essential that we recapture the Victorian and post-war sense of purpose that symbolised progress and possibility, and ultimately delivered improvements to people's everyday lives. It was that kind of get up and go that made the Derwent valley the home of the industrial revolution, using the power of rivers to drive the mills in places such as Belper and Milford—cheap renewable energy, almost two centuries before it was fashionable. If we want this country to continue to punch above its weight, we must resolve the delay and frustration I have referred to. Failure to do so will literally mean that we cannot keep the lights on. Bearing that in mind, in the short time that I have, I will focus my contribution on the bits of the Bill that relate to energy.

Measures in the Bill will bring a much-welcomed boost to EV charging infrastructure. Drivers of electric vehicles know all too well the frustration of being unable to undertake long journeys, given the lack of adequate chargers in many areas—particularly the east midlands, which has one of the lowest proportions of electric chargers per 100,000 people anywhere in the UK. That investment will be welcome news to companies such as Trentbarton, a bus operator serving my constituency. It wants to transition to a greener fleet of electric buses, but it has been hampered by insufficient public infrastructure, including the high cost of connecting to the grid and a lack of availability of adequate charging facilities locally. This legislation must be a springboard for embracing not only the infrastructure we need today, but the infrastructure we will need tomorrow. In that light, I want to see work done on hydrogen infrastructure.

I also want to speak about people who feel anxious about change. This is nothing new; it is as old as time itself. People in my constituency have some concerns about National Grid's proposed pylon upgrade between Chesterfield and Willington. I ask the Government to please ensure that National Grid listens to people in Morley, Stanley, Ockbrook and Borrowash and makes changes where it is right to do so, so that it can deliver projects with respect for communities. Communities' concerns cannot be dismissed, and while we must upgrade our electricity infrastructure to help us transition to

[Jonathan Davies]

net zero, deliver cheaper bills and achieve energy independence, my role in this place is to speak up for people in Mid Derbyshire and ensure they are heard and respected. However, although opposing all new infrastructure without collaborating to improve it might feel like a victory in the short term, the costs of failing to step up will be borne by all of us, especially the next generation.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the final speaker.

9.23 pm

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As a Glasgow MP, I emphasise how important this Bill is for Scotland and Scotland's economy. We have huge opportunities in the form of offshore wind and floating wind, but those opportunities depend on the development of transmission infrastructure in England. This Bill will help to reduce bills in Scotland by getting us away from expensive gas and on to cheaper fixed-price wind. Delays in England cost my poor constituents a lot of money.

The Bill does much more than that. It modernises the regime for connections to the electricity transmission and distribution system, speeding up the connection of vital energy projects for energy security. The UK Government have worked closely with the Scottish Government—delivering on their promise to put country first and Scotland first, and party second—to modernise the regime for consenting overhead power lines and generating stations in Scotland.

The Bill also makes provision for long-duration energy storage. The House may wonder what that is. There is all sorts of exciting new technology in this area, but I commend to everyone a visit to Cruachan power station to see the hollow mountain in the glens of Scotland. They will see how important it is and what great opportunities it provides for British engineering, and for the children in our schools to pursue careers in engineering. There are also other reforms that are important to the electricity sector in Scotland.

This may be a historic moment of some agreement between the SNP and the Labour party in this Chamber, but I would not want to be too gentle on the SNP Scottish Government, which takes far too long to consent projects in Scotland. Far too many projects sit on Ministers' desks for far too long, and that is holding back investment. The same applies with the SNP council in Glasgow. We need to get going on some of these consents, and the SNP in Glasgow and Edinburgh need to get a move on with consenting projects that will create jobs and assist my constituents.

This is a great Bill. It looks to the future. It will create opportunities for Britain. It is a bill of aspiration and ambition for our country. For too long, we have kept on saying no to great developments that create jobs and create wealth. This Bill says, "Let's go for it. Let's create jobs. Let's create investment." I support it fully.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We now come to the Front Benchers for the wind-ups.

9.26 pm

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): There have been many eloquent and thoughtful contributions to the debate today, and I would like to build on and respond to some of the comments that have been made. Great speeches have been made by hon. Friends and Members from all parts of the House. In particular, may I mention my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay)? Like me, he has some concerns about the Bill, despite knowing the Government's genuine intentions. It comes with some serious questions, particularly about giving power to Natural England—a quango—while removing and cutting other quangos; and about the future resourcing of Natural England, with those extra responsibilities. I hope the Minister for Housing and Planning will be able to answer some of those concerns in his wind-up.

The Deputy Prime Minister has maintained that democracy will still be there for local people who want to have their say over planning applications, but the simple fact is that the Bill will cut the rights of planning committees and local authorities to make decisions for their local areas. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith) mentioned that house building was up in rural areas versus urban areas, and I will come on to that point later. He was absolutely right to outline the challenges he has in Mid Buckinghamshire and in the wider county. He was also right to focus on the infrastructure and how it is wrong just to focus on renewables. Thousands of acres will be used up for solar power across the country, and the Conservatives believe that we should be looking at alternative options for energy.

The hon. Member for Crawley (Peter Lamb) says that he is a planning bore, and that he became one during his time listening to various members of the Labour party. When we were both in opposing student political parties at the University of Southampton in 2000—not so long ago, I will say—he was not a bore then, and I do not expect that he will be in the speeches he makes during his career in the House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) is a strong advocate for his constituency. He is right to say that the introduction of EDPs is a good idea, but as cases show—I will develop some of the thinking behind this later on—there is a mercenary approach that does not provide local habitat protection, and just tries to move the issues somewhere else.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox) mentioned local planning and removing powers. He said that the use of the compulsory purchase order is anti-democratic when it comes to agricultural land, and he is absolutely correct. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson) recognises, as we do, the Government's mandate to try to build the 1.5 million homes required under their legislation. However, I have to say to the House that nobody believes they will be able to achieve it, including the Minister for Housing and Planning—[*Interruption.*] It is on the record.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) mentioned the "rural versus urban" competition that the Government have created, and the 80% uplift in his constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Lewis Cocking) said that targets had doubled

in his constituency while they were down in London. I failed to persuade a single Labour Member to admit that the Mayor of London is not capable of delivering the numbers, although the Government have reduced them by a record amount. My hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) said that there were no details of community improvement funds, and that the threshold for solar developments was still too low and needed to be raised. We look forward to discussing that in Committee.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) mentioned the green belt and nature being at the heart of planning, and the top-down application in the Bill. I completely agree with her. Last but by no means least, my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) said that development consent orders should be accountable and better suited for local people, and we entirely agree.

We on this side of the House have always had concerns about the Government's centralising zeal when it comes to planning. When they first introduced the Bill to the House, it cemented many of our fears about the traditional centralising mission that Ministers in this Administration have shown a taste for in various areas of government since taking office. Let us face it: that is the Labour party's way. While we all recognise that there is a need for tangible changes to deliver suitable and relevant infrastructure, they should not be to the detriment of the rights and responsibilities of locally elected representatives and planning committees or those who now face having their land taken away by this Government's unfair compulsory purchase order changes; but that is what the Bill does. The Deputy Prime Minister said that she wanted to streamline decision making, but we all know that the Bill takes those local powers away.

I once said during a Westminster Hall debate that it was fundamentally not good practice or good governance to deliver substantial changes to the national planning policy framework before legislating for an overarching change in planning infrastructure policy. It leads to confusion on the ground and delays in good planning, and rushed enforced devolution and local government reorganisation will further delay and complicate the intended consequences of the Bill. Let us also not forget that the Government have now introduced new housing targets that will reclassify land from grey belt, and will see areas green-lighted for development over the objections of local people and local authorities. This Bill will do that on a strategic scale that we have never seen before. Instead of delivering an algorithm that would fairly distribute building targets, the Government have introduced a politically motivated, unfair housing target regime that has opposition councils in its crosshairs, tripling the building burden in some cases, while rewarding Labour councils for their failure to deliver in their own authorities. This reeks of political gerrymandering, and the Government must think again.

The Deputy Prime Minister said that she wanted the homes that she will be delivering to be affordable. May I remind Labour Members that it was her Government, when she came in, who scrapped Help to Buy, scrapped shared ownership, and scrapped mechanisms that allowed the people in this country to get on to the housing ladder?

There are three areas of concern in the Bill. First, it threatens to remove local councillors' ability to have their say by setting up a national scheme of delegation

that will specify which types of application will be determined by council officers and which should go to planning committees—rules all made from the desks of Ministers in Whitehall—but not planning applications that can be decided in the committee rooms of town halls across the United Kingdom. The Local Government Association agrees, and has commented:

“there remain concerns around how it will ensure that councils—who know their areas best and what they need—remain at the heart of the planning process. The democratic role of councillors in decision-making is the backbone of the English”

—and British—

“planning system, and this should not be diminished.”

We agree; the Government do not.

These changes will require rural county areas to develop 56% more housing than the last Government's standard method. That is more than any other local authority type and equates to over 180,000 homes needing to be delivered in counties per year, compared with just over 115,000 under the previous method. On average, that is a rural uplift of 115%, while urban areas with major conurbations—mostly Labour authorities—are only up by 17%.

Joe Morris: The hon. Gentleman and I both represent rural constituencies, and we both know there is a demographic crisis in those areas. Does he agree that young people in rural areas need homes to live in and homes to work from? What do he and his party have against young people in rural areas?

Paul Holmes: I do not have anything against young people in rural areas at all, but surely the hon. Gentleman's constituents will not see it as fair that his Government have reduced targets on their own authorities in urban centres, where there is already the infrastructure, where generally housing supply is better and where it is easier to get that infrastructure through, but are punishing rural areas across the country.

It is not a sensible or feasible solution to a very clear problem; it will drastically increase pressure on existing rural infrastructure and override the democratically elected local leaders who have a stake in, and should have a say in, the development of their local areas. It also raises the question of how this legislation is deliverable when local government reorganisation will change the spatial development strategies of local authorities. It is further concerning that the chief executive of Homes England has cast doubt on whether the Government can realistically meet their goal of 1.5 million homes, and so did the Housing Minister, in a Select Committee hearing last year. Council leaders, developers and even the Government's own experts are warning that these targets are unachievable.

Wendy Morton: On that point, does my hon. Friend agree that one way of helping to deliver homes would be to ensure that those that have planning permission are built out first, thus saving the green belt and some of our suburban areas and rural areas, sooner rather than later? [*Interruption.*]

Paul Holmes: Labour Members shout from a sedentary position to ask why we never did it. This is one of the largest planning Bills to come before the House in a number of years, and nowhere have the Government mentioned that they would force developers to build

[Paul Holmes]

houses that have already been given planning permission. We have a Government who have reduced housing targets in urban areas, where it is easier to build due to existing infrastructure, population density and the availability of brownfield sites.

Instead, Labour's reforms to the NPPF and their proposals in this Bill have resulted in top-down targets that will silence local voices. The Government have chosen to prioritise building in rural areas and on the green belt rather than focusing where the demand for housing is greatest, in our cities and urban centres. By only allowing councillors to debate and discuss the proposals that the Deputy Prime Minister and the Government define as large development, local people's voices within the planning system will be eroded, taking away the discretion that planning committees can use to resolve small applications that come down to very nuanced decisions.

The principle of environmental delivery plans is certainly welcome, and we know they have been looked on favourably by proponents of sustainable development. It is vital that nature recovery is incorporated into building plans. It is concerning, however, as the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) said, that Natural England will have its workload dramatically increased, amid uncertainty about whether it has the budget and authority and whether it can bear the burden of those additional responsibilities. Can the Minister outline any assessment his Department has done on the budgetary increases that would be required for Natural England to take on the additional responsibilities envisaged in the Bill?

Furthermore, and most concerning, the Government seek to overhaul the compulsory purchase process, allowing land to be acquired for projects deemed to be in the public interest, and will change the process to allow faster land acquisition. Farmers may be forced to sell the land for its current value, rather than its potential worth if developed, but farmers deserve a fair price if they choose to sell their land, rather than below market price. They are already being hammered over inheritance tax and the suspension of the sustainable farming incentive; the proposed changes to CPOs will introduce a further power imbalance that threatens to override their legitimate right to a fair deal.

The Countryside Alliance warns that

"giving councils more power to reduce the value of land is a step too far, especially in the context of such a challenging outlook for farmers and the inheritance tax fiasco. This is not about people blocking development, it's about the state paying the market price for land. We need more houses and more economic development, but not at the cost of basic principles."

Although it is true that tenant farmers will get an increase on any CPO purchases, landowning farmers who already face unsustainable pressure will once again be short-changed by this Government's plans.

While the Government say that they want to deliver more homes, increase affordability, streamline the system and deliver the homes we need, nobody accepts that they can do it. They give with one hand, but have overwhelmingly taken away with the other, through destroying this country's economy, the ability of developers and people to build the housing we need. As we have outlined, their plans, as with any rushed piece of work,

threaten to overwhelm the system, in some cases threaten to erode the safeguards in place to encourage sustainable and vital development, and remove local voices from local people. I look forward to Labour MPs explaining to the Labour leaders of their councils why their Labour Deputy Prime Minister took away their local rights as councillors to represent their local communities.

We will always stand up against excessive Government centralisation, and in favour of local representatives who know their communities best. We have a duty to do so. We have a duty to defend farmers who, as stewards of the land, must have their land rights respected; to defend local democracy and the role of local councils, which disagree with their power being taken away; and to defend the people out there who want new housing, but want local choices for local people. It is clear that the Government cannot deliver on that challenge. We will amend and improve the Bill to ensure that it delivers for local councillors and local people; the Government simply have not done so.

9.41 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): It is a real pleasure to close this Second Reading debate for the Government, and I thank all hon. and right hon. Members who have participated in it. Not unexpectedly, it has been a debate of contrasts. On the one hand, we have had the privilege of listening to a large number of well-informed and thoughtful contributions from hon. Members who agree with the main principles of the Bill. In a crowded field, I commend in particular the excellent speeches made by my hon. Friends the Members for Barking (Nesil Caliskan), for Northampton South (Mike Reader), for Basingstoke (Luke Murphy), for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin), for Erewash (Adam Thompson), for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) and for Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis). Set against those, we were subjected to a series of contributions from hon. and right hon. Members who, while professing support in principle for the intentions of the Bill, nevertheless alighted on a range of flawed and in some cases spurious reasons why they oppose it.

I am saddened to say that among the most glaring examples of that approach was the speech made by the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos), whose party's reasoned amendment was not selected. While I appreciate fully his need to manage the discordant voices on his own Benches when it comes to housing and major infrastructure, the arguments he made were both confused and disingenuous. This Government wholly reject his claim that the Bill will not result in the ambitious delivery of the infrastructure and housing the country needs. I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that a party that declared in its manifesto only last year that it was committed to

"Increasing building of new homes to 380,000 a year"

should be getting behind this legislation, not seeking to block it. I sincerely hope that, even at this late stage, the Liberal Democrats will reconsider their position.

Gideon Amos: Does the Minister accept that it would be easier to support this Bill if it did not include clauses that provide the Secretary of State with the power not just to take some decisions away from planning committees, but to take all decisions away from planning committees, because that provision is completely unlimited in its scope?

Matthew Pennycook: That is not the case, and there has been a huge amount of scaremongering when it comes to the provisions in the Bill that relate to planning committees. I will deal with that particular point in due course.

Among hon. Members who do support the main principles of the Bill, there were of course understandable differences of opinion. Some expressed their unequivocal support for each and every one of its provisions, others conveyed their broad support while arguing for specific changes to be made or further measures to be added, but all were in agreement that this legislation must progress if we are to streamline the delivery of new homes and critical infrastructure, as the House as a whole ostensibly asserts that we must. Therein lies the crux of the issue and the reason, I must say candidly, for the cant at the heart of some of the speeches that we have heard.

We can all profess in principle our support for the ends—doing so is, after all, risk free—but what matters is whether we are prepared in practice to also will the means. When it came to housing and infrastructure, the previous Government were not willing to do so, hence the dissonance in their final years between their stated commitment to building more homes and their decision in practice to recklessly abolish mandatory housing targets and thereby torpedo housing supply in a forlorn attempt to appease a disgruntled group of their anti-housing Back Benchers. Thankfully, this Labour Government are prepared to do what it takes to deliver the homes and the infrastructure our country needs. The Bill is transformative. It will fundamentally change how we build things in this country. In so doing, it will help us to tackle the housing crisis, raise living standards in every part of the country and deliver on our plan for change.

During the five hours we have debated the Bill, an extremely wide range of issues has been raised. I have heard all of them and I will seek to respond to as many in the time available to me, but I will not be able to cover all of them. I will therefore deal with the main themes and issues that have been raised in the course of the debate. I will begin, if I may, with the various points made in relation to nationally significant infrastructure.

Members made a variety of points covering issues such as national policy statements and judicial review, but most of the contributions focused in on the changes the Bill will make to consultation requirements for nationally significant infrastructure projects. As the House will be aware, the NSIP planning regime was established through the Planning Act 2008 to provide more certainty on the need for nationally significant projects. In its early years, the system worked well. However, its performance has sharply deteriorated in recent years, at a time when the need for it has increased dramatically.

In 2021, it took, on average, 4.2 years for a project to secure development consent, compared with 2.6 years in 2012. The documentation, as has been referred to by a number of hon. Members, underpinning consents has been getting longer and in too many instances now runs to tens of thousands of pages. Alongside an increase in legal challenges, uncertainty about meeting statutory requirements has led to greater risk aversion and gold plating throughout the whole process. The costs of delays obviously increase the costs of projects, and those costs are ultimately passed on to taxpayers for public infrastructure and bill payers or customers for private infrastructure.

The measures in the Bill will provide for a faster and more certain consenting process, stripping away unnecessary consultation requirements that do nothing to improve applications or meaningfully engage communities. They will, to use the phrase used by the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty), ensure that the NSIP regime is firing on all cylinders. I want to make it clear that the measures in the Bill are not the limit of our ambitions on streamlining the NSIP regime. In particular, I noted the calls from several hon. Members to consider addressing the significant elongation of pre-application periods resulting from the way in which statutory procedures are now being applied. This is an issue to which the Deputy Prime Minister and I have already given a significant amount of thought, and I commit to giving further consideration to the case for using the Bill to address statutory requirements that would appear to be no longer driving good outcomes. I can assure those hon. Members that the Government will not hesitate to act boldly if there is a compelling case for reform in this area.

Many hon. Members touched on the nature restoration fund. We are fully committed to making sure development contributes to nature's recovery, delivering a win-win for nature and the economy. We will be taking three steps to deliver on our new approach. First, responsibility for identifying actions to address environmental impacts will be moved away from multiple project-specific assessments in an area to a single strategic assessment and delivery plan. Secondly, more responsibility for planning and implementing strategic actions will be moved on to the state, delivered through organisations with the right expertise and the necessary flexibility to take actions that most effectively deliver positive outcomes for nature. Thirdly, we will allow impacts to be dealt with strategically in exchange for a financial payment, so development can proceed more quickly. Project-level assessments are then limited only to those harms not dealt with strategically.

To those hon. Members who raised concerns that the provisions will have the effect of reducing the level of environmental protection of existing environmental law, I assure them that that is not the case, something attested to by the section 20 statement on the face of the Bill in the name of the Deputy Prime Minister. Our reforms are built around delivering overall positive outcomes for protected sites and species, and are the result of significant engagement across the development sector, environmental groups and nature service providers. That is why, at the Bill's introduction, we saw a range of voices welcoming the new approach it brings to unlocking a win-win for development and nature.

The shadow Secretary of State raised concerns about how quickly we will be able to implement environmental delivery plans. We are confident we can get EDPs in place fast. That is why we have been clear that we want to see the first EDPs prepared alongside the Bill and operational for developers to use shortly after Royal Assent. We are also looking for opportunities to provide up-front funding so that we can kick off action in advance of need, with costs recovered as development comes forward, which will allow us to get shovels in the ground and unlock homes and infrastructure more quickly.

Lastly, the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) raised concerns about the CPO powers given to Natural England. If we are

[Matthew Pennycook]

going to be successful in delivering a win-win for nature and the economy through the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, it is vital that Natural England has sufficient powers to deliver the conservation measures required. Compulsory purchase is just one tool, and we would expect Natural England to consider using such powers as a last resort, subject to appropriate scrutiny and oversight, including ultimate authorisation by the Secretary of State.

More broadly, the nature restoration fund will provide opportunities for landowners to work with Natural England to drive nature recovery, improving our green spaces for generations to come. I say to the right hon. Gentleman that this is not a radical change. Many public bodies with statutory powers have compulsory purchase powers, including local authorities and—as he of all people should be aware—health service bodies, as well as some executive agencies, such as Homes England.

I want to touch on planning committees before concluding. Several hon. Members raised concerns over our plan to modernise them; indeed, some suggested that our reforms are tantamount to removing democratic control from local people. That is simply not the case. The shadow Secretary of State asserted that residents would lose the opportunity to object to a planning application, which is incorrect. People will still be able to object to individual applications in the way they can now.

Kevin Hollinrake: How is what the Minister is saying consistent with what he said on the Floor of the House on 9 December, when he said:

“the changes are designed to... focus the time of elected councillors on the most significant or controversial applications”—[*Official Report*, 9 December 2024; Vol. 758, c. 673.]—

which he is going to dictate? Will he, at the very least, publish his draft regulations on what he intends through clause 46 alongside the passage of the Bill?

Matthew Pennycook: I will address that specific point in due course. The proposals are entirely consistent; we do want to make changes to where planning committees can determine decisions, but local residents will be able to object to applications in every instance, as they can now.

Planning is principally a local activity, and this Government have made clear at every available opportunity that the plan-led approach is and must remain the cornerstone of the planning system. Local plans are the best ways for communities to shape decisions about how to deliver the housing and wider development their areas need.

Alberto Costa: Will the Minister give way?

Matthew Pennycook: I am going to make some progress, if the hon. Gentleman does not mind.

We want more people involved in the development of local plans. The measures on planning decisions will simply ensure that the process of determining applications at a local level is more streamlined and efficient.

I have been a local councillor, and I have sat on planning committees, as I know many hon. Members have. We all know that there is significant room for

improvement in how such committees operate. It is, therefore, disappointing to hear hon. Members portray what are sensible proposals for modernising the local planning system as a fundamental attack on local democracy when they are anything but.

Decisions about what to build and where should be shaped by local communities and reflect the views of local residents. Local democratic oversight of planning decisions is essential, but it is also vital that planning committees operate as effectively as possible. Planning committees need to be focused on key applications for larger developments, not small-scale projects or niche technical details. The Bill will ensure they can play a proper role in scrutinising development without obstructing it, while maximising the use of experienced professional planners.

Wendy Morton *rose*—

Matthew Pennycook: I will happily give way for the final time.

Wendy Morton: I would like to seek some clarity from the Minister on that: he says that local councillors will be able to scrutinise, but not actually stop—this is the point I want to probe—a large-scale planning application.

Matthew Pennycook: No; the right hon. Lady has misunderstood me. Planning committees will be able to scrutinise and make decisions on a series of applications. On a point raised by the shadow Secretary of State, the House should also be aware that we intend to formally consult on these measures in the coming weeks. Hon. Members will therefore be able to engage with the detail and precisely the type of question that the right hon. Lady raises, rightly, alongside consideration of the Bill.

Gideon Amos: Will the Minister give way?

Matthew Pennycook: I am not going to give way; I am going to make some progress.

I will briefly address CPO powers before I conclude, as a number of hon. Members raised concerns about our changes to the process. Let me be clear: these reforms are not about targeting farmers or any specific types of land or landowners. We want to reform the compulsory purchase process and land compensation rules to speed up and lower the costs of the delivery of housing and infrastructure in the public interest.

We have already taken action, fully implementing direction powers that provide for the removal of hope value from the assessment of compensation for certain types of CPOs, such as those facilitating affordable housing—provisions, I might say, introduced by the previous Government in the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023. We have published updated and more detailed guidance on the process to help local authorities.

This Bill will now go further, ensuring that the process for acquiring land with a direction is more efficient and that administrative costs are reduced, and we are expanding the power to remove hope value by directions to parish and town councils. We want to see these powers used and will work closely with local authorities to ensure that they have the support to take advantage of the reforms.

To conclude, I thank all hon. and right hon. Members who contributed to the debate. I look forward to engaging with hon. Members across the House as the Bill progresses. A wide range of views have been expressed over the course of the debate, but there is clearly a broad consensus that when it comes to delivering new homes and critical infrastructure—[*Interruption.*] The shadow Minister says no, so perhaps he does not agree, but the status quo is failing the country and more importantly those who last year sent us to this place to do better.

The process of securing consent for nationally significant infrastructure projects is demonstrably too slow and uncertain and is constraining economic growth and undermining our energy security. The current approach to development and the environment too often sees both sustainable house building and nature recovery stall. In exercising essential local democratic oversight, planning committees clearly do not operate as effectively as they could, and local planning authorities do not have adequate funding to deliver their services.

The compulsory purchase order process is patently too slow and cumbersome, and development corporations are not equipped to operate in the way we will need them to in the years ahead. It is abundantly clear that the lack of effective mechanisms for cross-boundary strategic planning mean that we cannot address development and infrastructure needs across sub-regions as well as we otherwise might.

We can and must do things differently. That means being prepared to will the means as well as the ends. Fourteen years of failure have left the country with a belief that nothing works, that nothing gets built, and that Britain can no longer do big things. This Government refuse to accept the stagnation and decline we were bequeathed. We were elected on the promise of change, and we are determined to deliver it. Through the measures introduced by this landmark Bill, we will get Britain building again, unleash economic growth and deliver on the promise of national renewal. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 330, Noes 74.

Division No. 139]

[9.56 pm

AYES

Abbott, Jack	Baines, David
Abrahams, Debbie	Baker, Alex
Ahmed, Dr Zubir	Baker, Richard
Akehurst, Luke	Bance, Antonia
Alaba, Mr Bayo	Barker, Paula
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas	Barron, Lee
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Ali, Rushanara	Beales, Danny
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Beavers, Lorraine
Anderson, Callum	Begum, Apsana (<i>Proxy vote cast by Zarah Sultana</i>)
Anderson, Fleur	Bell, Torsten
Arthur, Dr Scott	Benn, rh Hilary
Asato, Jess	Berry, Siân
Asser, James	Billington, Ms Polly
Athwal, Jas	Blake, Olivia (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)
Atkinson, Catherine	Bloore, Chris
Atkinson, Lewis	
Bailey, Mr Calvin	
Bailey, Olivia	

Blundell, Mrs Elsie (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)	Fookes, Catherine
Bonavia, Kevin	Foster, Mr Paul
Botterill, Jade	Foxcroft, Vicky
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena	Foy, Mary Kelly
Brash, Mr Jonathan	Furniss, Gill
Brickell, Phil	Gardiner, Barry
Bryant, Chris	Gardner, Dr Allison
Burke, Maureen	Gelder, Anna
Burton-Sampson, David	Gemmell, Alan
Butler, Dawn	German, Gill
Byrne, Ian	Gilbert, Tracy
Byrne, rh Liam	Glindon, Mary
Cadbury, Ruth	Goldsborough, Ben (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)
Caliskan, Nesil	Gosling, Jodie
Campbell, Irene	Gould, Georgina
Campbell, Juliet	Grady, John
Campbell-Savours, Markus	Gwynne, Andrew (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)
Carden, Dan	Hack, Amanda
Carling, Sam	Hall, Sarah
Champion, Sarah	Hamilton, Fabian
Charalambous, Bambos	Charters, Mr Luke
Charters, Mr Luke	Chowns, Ellie
Chowns, Ellie	Coleman, Ben
Coleman, Ben	Collier, Jacob
Collier, Jacob	Collinge, Lizzi
Collinge, Lizzi	Collins, Tom
Collins, Tom	Conlon, Liam
Conlon, Liam	Coombes, Sarah
Coombes, Sarah	Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Andrew	Cooper, Dr Beccy
Cooper, Dr Beccy	Costigan, Deirdre
Costigan, Deirdre	Cox, Pam
Cox, Pam	Coyle, Neil
Coyle, Neil	Craft, Jen
Craft, Jen	Creagh, Mary
Creagh, Mary	Creasy, Ms Stella
Creasy, Ms Stella	Crichton, Torcuil
Crichton, Torcuil	Curtis, Chris
Curtis, Chris	Dalton, Ashley
Dalton, Ashley	Darlington, Emily
Darlington, Emily	Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Jonathan	Davies, Paul
Davies, Paul	Davies, Shaun
Davies, Shaun	Davies-Jones, Alex
Davies-Jones, Alex	Dean, Josh
Dean, Josh	Denyer, Carla
Denyer, Carla	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Dickson, Jim
Dickson, Jim	Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Anna	Dollimore, Helena
Dollimore, Helena	Doughty, Stephen
Doughty, Stephen	Dowd, Peter
Dowd, Peter	Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Duncan-Jordan, Neil	Eagle, rh Maria
Eagle, rh Maria	Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Lauren	Edwards, Sarah
Edwards, Sarah	Egan, Damien
Egan, Damien	Elmore, Chris
Elmore, Chris	Entwistle, Kirith
Entwistle, Kirith	Eshalomi, Florence
Eshalomi, Florence	Esterson, Bill
Esterson, Bill	Evans, Chris
Evans, Chris	Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Fahnbulleh, Miatta	Falconer, Mr Hamish
Falconer, Mr Hamish	Farnsworth, Linsey
Farnsworth, Linsey	Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Fenton-Glynn, Josh	Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Mark	Ferguson, Patricia
Ferguson, Patricia	Footy, Emma
Footy, Emma	

Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorrin, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Murray, James
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate (*Proxy vote cast by Kim Johnson*)
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin

Race, Steve
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scrogam, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen

Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 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
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Kate Dearden and
 Martin McCluskey**

NOES

Adam, Shockat
 Allister, Jim
 Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Lee
 Aquarone, Steff
 Bennett, Alison
 Brewer, Alex
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Cane, Charlotte
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Chadwick, David (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster*)
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Coghlan, Chris
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Davies, Ann
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Dyke, Sarah
 Farron, Tim
 Foord, Richard
 Forster, Mr Will
 Franklin, Zöe
 George, Andrew
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Green, Sarah
 Harding, Monica
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jones, Clive
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Lake, Ben

MacCleary, James
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Martin, Mike
 Mathew, Brian
 McMurdoch, James (*Proxy vote cast by Lee Anderson*)
 Medi, Llinos
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Moran, Layla
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrison, Mr Tom (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster*)
 Munt, Tessa
 Murray, Susan
 Olney, Sarah
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shannon, Jim
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Sollom, Ian
 Stone, Jamie
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Cameron
 Voaden, Caroline
 Wilson, Munira
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:

**Bobby Dean and
 Charlie Maynard**

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read a Second time.

PLANNING AND INFRASTRUCTURE BILL (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Planning and Infrastructure Bill:

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 22 May 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.—*(Gen Kitchen.)*

Question agreed to.

PLANNING AND INFRASTRUCTURE BILL (MONEY)

King's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 51(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

(1) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State, a Government Department or another public authority; and

(2) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under or by virtue of any other Act out of money so provided.—*(Gen Kitchen.)*

Question agreed to.

PLANNING AND INFRASTRUCTURE BILL (WAYS AND MEANS)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 51(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, it is expedient to authorise:

(1) the charging of fees or levies under or by virtue of the Act; and

(2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—*(Gen Kitchen.)*

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

CONSTITUTIONAL LAW

That the draft Disclosure (Scotland) Act 2020 (Consequential Provisions and Modifications) Order 2025, which was laid before this House on 11 February, be approved.—*(Gen Kitchen.)*

Question agreed to.

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

ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS

That the draft Electronic Communications (Networks and Services) (Designated Vendor Directions) (Penalties) Order 2025, which was laid before this House on 11 February, be approved.—*(Gen Kitchen.)*

Question agreed to.

STANDARDS

Ordered,

That Melanie Onn be discharged from the Committee on Standards and Gill Furniss be added.—*(Gen Kitchen.)*

PRIVILEGES

Ordered,

That Melanie Onn be discharged from the Committee of Privileges and Gill Furniss be added.—*(Gen Kitchen.)*

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Ordered,

That Laura Kyrke-Smith be discharged from the International Development Committee and Tracy Gilbert be added.—*(Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)*

PETITION

Newcastle United Carabao Cup Win

10.11 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests regarding hospitality tickets received from Newcastle United last year. I rise to present this petition on Newcastle United's Carabao cup win. On 16 March, Newcastle United, under the leadership of Eddie Howe, overturned seven decades of disappointment to win the club's first major trophy since 1955. The club is so important to the Toon's culture, economy, reputation and, indeed, mood, and this win will be enjoyed by fans far into the future, but there is no formal way for fans to mark their appreciation of Newcastle United.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West,

Declares that Newcastle United Football Club is to be warmly congratulated on its recent Carabao Cup win; notes that this is the club's first major trophy win since 1955; and further declares the petitioners' ongoing support for Newcastle United and its fans.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to congratulate Newcastle United Football Club on its achievement, and to establish a national award to recognise major group sporting achievements.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P003053]

Male Suicide in Rotherham

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

10.13 pm

Jake Richards (Rother Valley) (Lab): In Rotherham, male suicide is a silent tragedy on the rise. As the local MP, I receive too many calls or messages early in the morning or late at night, telling me about another husband, father, brother or friend who has died in these tragic circumstances. Each call haunts us and our communities, but it is nothing compared to the unimaginable sense of grief and agony suffered by family and friends. The growing phenomenon of male suicide is part of a wider storm we face: of worsening mental health and mental health provisions for men; of splintering communities and support networks; and of a society that too often makes some men feel that they are unable to open up or reach out for help, or indeed that they are themselves part of the problem.

Tonight I want to make the argument for further Government action, and also offer a call to arms to us all. We can all do more to check in on our neighbours, friends and colleagues, and to build safe spaces for men to talk, to feel valued and to know that it is okay not to feel okay and that there is help. We should never forget the tragedy of women taking their own lives, too, and the particular circumstances that only women face that might lead them towards doing so. That matter is worthy of its own debate, though much of what we discuss will of course be relevant.

The numbers for men are startling and worth stating bluntly: suicide is the biggest killer of men aged under 50. Men account for three out of four suicides in England and Wales. A hundred men end their lives each week across the country. In Rotherham, men account for 79% of suicides.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): In Doncaster last year, 80% of those who died from suicide were men, and we of course have one of the largest numbers of veterans in the whole of Yorkshire and the Humber. Doncaster council has the armed forces covenant. Will my hon. Friend join me in promoting its work, particularly around the veteran-friendly suicide prevention training that makes a huge difference to all the people who take part in it?

Jake Richards: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Just on Friday, I had the Defence Secretary, who is with us today, and the Veterans Minister in Dinnington to speak with veterans groups and organisations. Mental health provision was right at the top of the agenda, as it should be. Beyond each individual tragedy is a wider story. There is a specific challenge for policymakers in grappling with male suicide.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman, who I spoke to beforehand. This is his first Adjournment debate, and it is on a subject that every one of us understands only too well. I am saddened to hear the vast number of reasons contributing to male suicide in his constituency. There is certainly more to be done to support men across the UK. Suicide happens everywhere and especially in men—70% of the suicides

in Northern Ireland are men. The majority of them occur in deprived areas. Does he agree that we need greater accessibility to mental health services in deprived areas to ensure that men are not left behind?

Jake Richards: I agree with the hon. Member, who makes a characteristically pithy point.

John Leaver, who does incredible work with men in tough times in Kiveton Park and Wales in my constituency, is in many ways the inspiration for the debate and the campaign I intend to run in Rotherham. John works with men and women, but has extensive experience of the particular issues that men face in his area. He has often been the person telling me of another suicide, and not infrequently it is somebody he knows well, played football with, went to school with or is an old family friend. He spoke to me about the effect of the decline of post-industrial towns and villages, such as Kiveton Park, Dinnington, Maltby and Thurgroft in my constituency, on men and notions of masculinity. Those places were built on the back of coalmining—a proud tradition of honest hard work, offering a sense of purpose and meaning for generations of young men. We should not simply look back with rose-tinted spectacles, but after the closure of the pits, we have too often struggled to replace that social fabric for men. These remain brilliant communities with a long-standing sense of solidarity and camaraderie, but too many within them still feel lost.

Even worse, too many men feel victimised or attacked. I was recently struck by the words of musician Sam Fender in a newspaper interview. Speaking about the towns in the north-east of England that he grew up in, he said lads were

“being shamed all the time and made to feel like they’re a problem. It’s this narrative being told to white boys from nowhere towns.”

I fear there is some truth to that—that men from towns built in a bygone era feel they are a problem in modern times. I want to play my part as the local MP in changing that, and I am not alone. Brilliant organisations in my constituency already do fantastic work. Andy’s Man Club in Maltby and Kiveton Park meet every Monday evening. Better Today, run by John Leaver, is incredible at supporting men in times of real difficulty. There are many fantastic sports clubs and associations, from boxing in Dinnington to Swallownest FC and Maltby Main FC. There are the regular coffee mornings, the walking and rambling clubs, and the monthly men’s breakfast in Anston. They all play a vital role in supporting men in difficult circumstances.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): Veterans have already been mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher). Would my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to Veterans In Need Together? He talks about organisations that support men. That organisation supports men every Wednesday at Morley fire station without fail and offers support to those who need it.

Jake Richards: That service in my hon. Friend’s constituency sounds vital—just like those in my constituency. The focus on veterans in particular is critical.

Suicide does not simply affect the person taking their own life. Families lose loved ones and towns and villages are scarred by the traumatic loss of people with great promise and talent. The number of men who kill themselves every year is eclipsed by the number of people affected by their loss. I will use my role as the local MP to press the Government to take action. There are specific policy issues that I want to raise.

I am very aware of specific issues to do with gambling and male suicide. I have met two local mothers who are fighting for justice after their sons, both of whom were hard-working, talented and honourable men, took their own lives far too young as a result of spiralling online gambling addictions. Social media and technology have allowed vulnerable users easier access to gambling. A report found two years ago that there had been a 43% annual rise in demand for NHS gambling clinics, and that one in three of those patients had already attempted to take their own lives. It is estimated that every year there are more than 400 gambling-related suicides in England—and those are the ones we know of. I have before urged the Government to consider ways in which we can empower coroners courts, and indeed place responsibilities on coroners, to look at these issues in a robust and rigorous manner. At the moment, the causative link between gambling addiction and suicide is not given appropriate recognition.

There are broader issues. Although the issue of men's mental health is complex, there are specific policy areas that the Government must confront. First, the rates of men taking their own lives are highest in the most deprived communities. The suicide rate in the most deprived 10% of areas in England in the two years from 2017 to 2019 was 14.1%—almost double the rate in the least deprived areas. Indeed, rates of men taking their own lives in the regions of England are almost double what they are in London. Tackling poverty and insecure work across our country is a Labour mission, and it is one that will save lives.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for giving way and for speaking so eloquently about this difficult and sensitive subject. On that point, it is known that those living in poverty are three times more likely to take their own lives or have mental health issues than people on the average wage. Linking into that, 85% of homeless people are men, and their homelessness is often related to mental health issues. I appreciate all the work that he is doing to highlight poverty.

Jake Richards: There is a direct link and we should not shy away from acknowledging, confronting and talking about it. When we talk about tackling poverty, we are talking about saving lives, too.

Secondly, we must save our NHS. This Government inherited a dilapidated health service and a particularly severely under-resourced mental health service. Fourteen years of under-investment and chaotic reform have hindered efforts to grasp this crisis. Long delays for treatment and diagnosis mean that so many men cannot get the support that they need and face worsening mental health in the meantime.

Thirdly, in my view we must be bolder in acknowledging the role that technology and social media have played in this crisis. New technology and social media can help efforts to combat men in difficult times: the internet can

allow faster access to mental health provisions and can provide a network. However, it has been clear for more than a decade now that technology and social media can be deeply damaging to mental health, eroding confidence, often siloing rather than enhancing our communities, and exposing people to potentially harmful material. I know that many colleagues in the House have been moved by the Netflix drama “Adolescence”, which shines a light on the way the internet can remould ideas of masculinity and purpose—completely unbeknown to those closest to the 13-year-old boy in that drama.

Men, especially our young men, are spending less time outside and less time meeting people and communicating in person—all things that make us far happier and healthier. They are often sat alone for hours being bombarded with algorithms showing unrealistic representations of life, or communicating through anonymous group chats. Research shows that self-harm content has sometimes been allowed to flourish on social media by companies failing to remove explicit images and encouraging those engaging with such content to befriend one another. The arrival of smartphones has taken place in parallel with sharp rises in depression and anxiety in our young people. Of particular concern is the impact that mobile phones have on our young people. The average 12-year-old now spends 29 hours a week on their phone—equivalent to doing a part-time job.

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend for securing the debate and for speaking so powerfully. Does he agree that we must also consider the employment-related, sectoral issues in tackling male suicide?

Jake Richards: Absolutely, and my hon. Friend has done so much admirable work in this area, long before my time in the House, so I can only learn from her. One point about suicide and male suicide is that an array of policy issues feed into it. This should not be a policy concern for the Government in silo; it should be part of every policy area, and every Department should have those concerns about mental health and suicide protection at its heart.

I was talking about mobile phones and the effect they have had. Since 2010, the average time that teens spend with friends each day has fallen by 65%. I applaud recent Government announcements about reviewing those policy areas, but I urge them to grasp the nettle when it comes to technology, phones, young people and mental health. In a decade's time I believe we will wonder why we did not do so far sooner.

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for securing this debate. I am working closely with him on the Mental Health Bill. Does he agree that one issue for families who are worried about their loved one is that when they are over the age of 18, there can be barriers in law in terms of the presumption of capacity and the Mental Capacity Act 2005 when it comes to raising the alarm with public authorities?

Jake Richards: I am grateful to the hon. Member, who has a remarkable ability to bring that important issue into any debate or intervention he makes. He is the most vociferous campaigner on that cause. I support him in that, and I know the Minister will also be listening.

[*Jake Richards*]

I want to finish with the action I will take as the local MP. First, I pledge to continue to support the brilliant services we already have. I remember attending my first Andy's Man Club in Maltby during the general election campaign. I must admit I was slightly cynical. I had seen the marketing, but questioned how effective or useful that informal meeting would be. I was blown away. Over the course of a few hours, a group of blokes spoke about their weeks, and their problems, over a cup of tea. Some of the chat was mundane: they were finding their work more boring, or they had had a good weekend with the family. Others were dealing with the most impossible trauma that put all else—in particular my election campaign—into stark perspective. Afterwards, everyone walked away ready to face the week, however big the challenges ahead. I have since met so many men who use that service. One of the first things I did once elected was to bring Andy's Man Club to Parliament. I promise to continue to champion its work, and the work of many others.

I also regularly meet local health practitioners in Rotherham to hear their strategies to bring down the rate of men ending their own lives locally. The work of Rotherham health and wellbeing board, and the South Yorkshire integrated care system is hugely commendable, not least the emphasis on improving data and evidence to ensure effective and timely interventions, and providing tailored, targeted support to priority groups and effective bereavement support to those affected by men taking their own lives. Those plans sit within strategies to tackle loneliness, health inequality and domestic abuse. I have committed to holding regular meetings with all GP practices in my constituency, and other support groups, to help tackle male suicide.

We will hear from the Minister shortly about the Government's national efforts, and from conversations with him I have no doubt that he grasps the severity of this crisis and the urgency with which this Government must confront it. Rest assured, I will be challenging the Government every step of the way to be ambitious in this agenda, and to ensure that policies will work for every town and village in Rotherham. Locally, I will be setting up my Rotherham taskforce to hold authorities to account, working with men and women who are on the front line confronting this issue. We will lead the ongoing awareness campaign and ensure that professionals, and local and national Government, treat this issue with the seriousness it deserves. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak about this important issue, and I hope that by doing so we begin more conversations across our borough. Together, we can bring about meaningful change, and save lives.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab) *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I believe the hon. Lady has permission from the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Jake Richards) to make a brief contribution.

10.28 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate.

We have heard that male mental health is an issue that deserves our full attention. In my constituency of Portsmouth, suicide is the leading cause of death among males aged between 20 to 49. Each year 24 people in Portsmouth take their own lives, and 78% of them are men. Compared with the national average, Portsmouth has higher rates of divorce, homelessness and alcohol-related admissions, which are all contributing factors to poor mental health and suicide. Despite those heartbreaking statistics, we lack enough dedicated local charities. National charities such as the Samaritans and Andy's Man Club provide critical support but lack local initiatives. However, groups such as SPEAK and Man Mind, and fabulous individuals, help men to have spaces to talk and mental health walks. However, those alone are not enough and we need more funding.

My constituency is home to many veterans, a group in dire need of improved mental health support. Yet in reports on suicide prevention action from 2022 to 2025, veterans are not even listed as a high-risk group. That is unacceptable. Portsmouth has a proud military history and we must do what we can.

The construction industry is the backbone of our nation, and suicide rates in that group are four times higher than the national average. One of the biggest barriers to male mental health support is stigma and the culture of silence.

As the mum of three lads, or should I say young men, it is heartbreaking for me to know that they have had first-hand experience in their friendship groups of male suicide. Fortunately, not all those attempts were successful, but some were. That has had a lasting impact on the young men's outlook and their friendships, and has been devastating for those around them.

It is time for the Government to take bold steps to tackle the crisis. We need targeted funding for male mental health services, in combination with stronger support for at-risk groups, whether they are veterans, construction workers or young men. We must create safe spaces for men to open up, and we must ensure that no man feels that suicide is his only option, because it is not.

10.30 pm

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Jake Richards) for securing this debate and for raising the extremely serious issue of male suicide. I also congratulate him on obtaining his first Adjournment debate. I am sure that it will not be the last. He is a doughty campaigner for his constituents. I thank other Members for their valuable contributions, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin), who made a powerful speech. I offer my deepest condolences to those who have been tragically bereaved by suicide.

Men tend to seek help for their mental health less than women. As my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley said, men are also more likely to die by suicide, accounting for three out of four suicides. Rates in Rother Valley sadly reflect that statistic.

Today, mental ill health is on the rise, and the shocking fact is that suicide is the biggest killer for men under 50. Just as we are determined to end the injustices that women face in healthcare, we will not shy away from the

need to focus on men's health too. That is why the Government will publish a men's health strategy to tackle those problems head-on.

In November, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care brought together leading campaigners, experts and the Premier League to gather ideas and inform our strategy and our 10-year health plan. We take suicide prevention extremely seriously, because every suicide is a tragedy that has a devastating and enduring impact on families, friends and communities. With that in mind, I would like to express my gratitude for the hard work and dedication of local frontline services, including the voluntary sector, which play such a vital role in supporting people who experience suicidal thoughts or contemplate taking their own lives. Such organisations include Andy's Man Club, Rotherham Samaritans and James' Place, to name just a few.

The cross-sector suicide prevention strategy for England, which was published in 2023, has made some progress, and we are working closely with local authorities, health systems and our partners in the voluntary community to see that progress through. The strategy identifies middle-aged men as a priority group for targeted support at a national level. It rightly focuses on key drivers that we know can affect men's lives, such as gambling, financial difficulties and substance misuse.

Rotherham council has developed a three-year plan for suicide prevention and self-harm, which I understand is currently out for consultation with local partners. I commend the council and all local partners involved in the development of the plan. I hope that it will provide a strong foundation for a new partnership between local government and national Government, because people in my hon. Friend's constituency deserve backing at every level.

My hon. Friend raised the shocking issue of young men taking their own lives as a result of problem gambling. The NHS has expanded support for those who need help to overcome gambling addictions. Individuals can self-refer to specialist gambling clinics in England, where they can be supported by psychiatrists.

Our suicide prevention strategy for England identifies gambling as a common risk factor and lists actions to reduce suicide as a result of gambling. We will explore opportunities to go further to support people with gambling addictions. It can be hard for a young man in today's society, particularly for boys in the most deprived areas of England, who are expected to live almost 10 years less than those in the wealthiest areas.

We are committed to improving the nation's mental health services to ensure that individuals can get the support they need when they need it. We are recruiting 8,500 new mental health workers, who will be trained to support people at risk of suicide. We are also committed to improving the support available to those experiencing a mental health crisis. This year, the Government are providing £26 million in capital investment to open new mental health crisis centres, reducing pressure on busy A&E services and ensuring that people have the support they need when and where they need it. These new centres will include crisis houses, providing overnight accommodation, sanctuaries and safe havens, calm environments for people to visit during the day and mental health-specific spaces in or adjacent to A&E departments.

I am also grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley for raising the important issue of technology, which can have a profoundly damaging effect. We should all be concerned about the widespread availability of harmful content online that promotes suicide and self-harm and can be easily accessed by people who may be vulnerable. The suicide prevention strategy for England identifies online safety as a priority area for action across Government. We are working closely with our colleagues at the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology in this area, including to deliver the commitments in the strategy and to look at what else can be done to address online harms, including harmful content shared on pro-suicide websites and forums.

There is still uncertainty about the relationship between screen time, social media use and child development. However, I look forward to seeing the results of DSIT's research into the impact of smartphones on children, which is due to be published in May this year. Our current focus is on keeping young people safe while also benefiting from the latest technology. By the summer, robust new protections for children will be in force through the Online Safety Act 2023 to protect them from harmful content and ensure that they have an age-appropriate experience online. Alongside getting those laws in place, we are committed to building the evidence base to inform future action to protect young people online.

It is not only the dangers of technology that are a concern for young people. Young people present unique challenges, and early intervention is vital if we want to stop children and young people from reaching crisis point today or developing mental health issues in the longer term. Schools and colleges play an important role in that early support, which is why we are providing access to a mental health professional for every school. We know that mental health support teams, such as the With Me In Mind team based in Doncaster and Rotherham, help to meet the mental health needs of children and young people in education settings.

We are also committed to rolling out open access Young Futures hubs in communities. This national network is expected to bring local services together and deliver support for young people facing mental health challenges. The Department for Education is also reviewing the relationship, sex and health education statutory guidance, and the Secretary of State for Education is clear that children's wellbeing should be at the heart of it. The DFE will look carefully at the consultation responses, considering relevant evidence and talking to partners, including on mental wellbeing and suicide prevention, before setting out next steps and engaging with wider experts. As part of this process, the DFE will explore whether additional content is required, including on suicide and self-harm.

Mental health is, and remains, a priority for the NHS. It is backed by the mental health investment standard, which continues in 2025-26 to ensure that mental health funding is ringfenced to support delivery of our commitments, including those outlined in the NHS planning guidance. The Government have a statutory requirement to publish an annual statement setting out expectations for NHS mental health spending before the next financial year begins. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will publish that statement in due course.

[Stephen Kinnock]

I will end with a call to action. Suicide is everyone's business; when we improve men's health, the benefits can ripple through families, communities, societies and the economy. When we strive to improve men's health, it will not just transform the lives of boys and men, but those of their wives, mothers, sisters, partners, mates, neighbours, children, teachers and doctors. That is why I strongly encourage all the men listening to this debate

to go to the Change NHS online portal, to give their views on how to build an NHS that is fit for the future through our 10-year health plan. Together, we will transform healthcare for men in the Rother valley, in the north of England, and across our country.

Question put and agreed to.

10.39 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 24 March 2025

[DAVID MUNDELL *in the Chair*]

European Union: UK Membership

4.30 pm

Paul Davies (Colne Valley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 700005 relating to the UK joining the European Union.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. The petition is on an important subject and has gained more than 128,537 signatures. The lead petitioner, Robert McMaster, is sitting in the Public Gallery with his amazing wife—we were chatting earlier on. He is not a stranger to this place: he informed me that he was shown around the whole estate as a very young boy as his father, Stanley McMaster, represented Belfast East between 1959 and 1974. Welcome back, Robert.

The petition makes a straightforward request of the Government:

“Apply for the UK to join the European Union as a full member as soon as possible”.

It states:

“I believe joining the EU would boost the economy, increase global influence, improve collaboration and provide stability & freedom. I believe that Brexit hasn’t brought any tangible benefit and there is no future prospect of any, that the UK has changed its mind and that this should be recognised.”

This matter has sparked considerable debate across our nation since the referendum in 2016, and it is essential that we approach it with a balanced perspective, considering both the benefits and the challenges that it presents. The decision to leave the European Union was a momentous one and has had profound implications for our country. We must reflect on the journey that we have taken since and consider the path that lies ahead. The question before us is whether the UK should seek to rejoin the European Union, and if so, what the implications of such a move would be.

Many people would contend that there are several compelling arguments in favour of the UK rejoining the European Union, and I am sure that we will hear many of those during the debate. First, EU membership provides significant economic benefits. The EU is one of the largest single markets in the world, and being part of it would grant UK businesses access to more than 450 million consumers. The argument is that that access would boost trade, create jobs and stimulate economic growth. I am sure that a number of colleagues in the Chamber today will argue that rejoining the EU would facilitate smoother trade relations with our closest neighbours.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Mr Mundell, you and I both know that the European structural funds were fundamental to some of the remotest parts of the UK for investment in harbours, roads and other infrastructure. May I just say to the hon. Member that that was a benefit that we enjoyed when we were part of the EU and, whatever happens in the future, we hope that this Government or future Governments will seek to replicate and replace it?

Paul Davies: I thank the hon. Member for those comments, which I very much appreciate. I am sure that as we go through the debate, we will get much more detail about similar issues. I will refer later to what the Government are doing to try to ensure that we establish a close relationship with Europe.

We know that, since Brexit, UK businesses have faced increased bureaucracy and border checks, which have hindered the flow of goods and services. The lead petitioner and others have argued that rejoining the EU could alleviate those issues, making it easier for businesses to operate and thrive.

Another important consideration is the potential for enhanced security co-operation. The EU has robust mechanisms for collaboration on issues such as counter-terrorism, intelligence sharing and law enforcement. The argument is that, by rejoining, the UK could strengthen its security ties with European partners, contributing to a safer and more secure environment for our citizens.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I support rejoining and always opposed leaving, for the reasons around national security and our national interest that my hon. Friend outlined. Is he surprised that there are no Reform Members present in the Chamber, and does he believe that that is because they spend more time sucking up to Trump and Putin than representing their constituents, in particular those in Clacton?

Paul Davies: I will not make particular comment on my hon. Friend’s comments, but they are well put. I am rather surprised; I did expect Reform Members to be present, but I am sure they have good reasons. They are probably working closely—

Neil Coyle: Too busy fighting.

Paul Davies: I could not possibly say.

Furthermore, some argue that rejoining the EU would allow the UK to have a say in shaping the rules and regulations that govern the single market, and that that influence would be crucial in ensuring that our interests were represented and that we could advocate policies that would benefit our economy and society.

On the other hand, there are valid arguments against rejoining the European Union.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to have the opportunity to debate membership of the EU. We know about the economic benefit of membership in securing trade, but does my hon. Friend agree that, at a time of real global instability, political union is also important?

Paul Davies: We have discussed that in the Chamber recently, and we have seen the fantastic work that the Prime Minister is doing with our close neighbours. Given what we face from Russia—a threat to all of us—working as closely as we can across Europe is crucial at the moment.

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): One of the reasons that was given for leaving the EU was that it would allow the UK to develop stronger relations with countries further afield, including the US. However, with the American President being somewhat gung-ho

[*Dr Roz Savage*]

with tariffs, and given his willingness to be best friends with the President of Russia, does the hon. Gentleman agree that we should look to strengthen our relations with our nearest cousins in Europe?

Paul Davies: Again, this is a subject that we have discussed a number of times in the Chamber. It is crucial that we work very closely with our friends in Europe, and we have seen the need for stability as we move forward in the next few years. The relationship between us and the new President of the US is newly formed and is starting to evolve. The work that is going on to create that relationship is perhaps different from what it has been in the past, but I am confident that, with the fantastic team that we have, along with our Prime Minister, we will establish an ongoing relationship with the US, which is one of our most important partners. However, it is also important for us to be a part of Europe when it comes to security.

One of the primary arguments for leaving the EU was around the issue of sovereignty. Our leaving the EU was driven in part by a desire to regain control over laws and regulations. By rejoining, we would cede some of that control back to Brussels, and that might not sit too well with those who value national sovereignty.

Additionally, the financial cost of EU membership is a significant consideration. The UK would be required to contribute to the EU budget, which could be seen as a burden on taxpayers. Although the economic benefits of membership may offset those costs, it is an important issue to consider.

Then, of course, there is the question of public opinion. We will all remember that the 2016 referendum revealed deep divisions in our society, and the issue of EU membership remains contentious. Rejoining the EU could reignite some of those divisions and lead to further political instability.

The Prime Minister has made it clear that the UK Government have ruled out the possibility of rejoining the European Union. However, since July they have concentrated efforts on strengthening our relationship with the EU. The Government have prioritised resetting the UK's relationship with the EU, which has involved a series of initiatives aimed at reducing barriers to trade, enhancing security co-operation and fostering closer ties with European partners.

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): My hon. Friend mentioned the costs of EU membership. Of course, many businesses, including touring artists and those in the creative sector, have suffered additional costs because of our withdrawal from the European Union. Does he agree that an early priority in negotiations on a refreshed and rebuilt relationship with the EU should be ensuring that it is easier for our touring artists to go to Europe and promote their work there?

Paul Davies: I absolutely agree. That is certainly a very apparent deficit of where we are now. We have amazing cultural heritage in this country, as well as amazing music and touring ability. Some of our bands and artists have really struggled to make sure that they have a future in Europe. I absolutely agree that that should be a priority.

A key step taken by the Government has been the negotiation of a veterinary agreement to reduce border checks on agrifoods. The agreement aims to streamline the movement of agricultural products between the UK and the EU, benefiting both farmers and consumers. Additionally, the Government have sought a mutual recognition agreement for professional qualifications, which would facilitate the movement of skilled workers and open up markets for UK service exporters.

The UK has been working towards an ambitious new UK-EU security pact, which we have already referred to. The pact aims to enhance collaboration on security and defence policy, ensuring that the UK and EU can work together to address common threats.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is doing a valiant job of introducing the debate. Does he agree that a Government who are not even prepared to countenance a youth mobility scheme to try to reset the relationship will not get far? We will certainly not get into the territory of what we really need, which is re-entry to the single market and the customs union. That is where we should look to make progress.

Paul Davies: It is true that that is one area that has been discussed and looked at, and various proposals have been put forward. I was trying to outline, in the light of the serious security concerns, that the closeness between our Prime Minister and Government and our European partners should be looked at as a real positive, and a real base for future working and development, maybe including on issues such as those that the hon. Gentleman referred to. I think that gives us a great foundation. The Government have been actively engaging with European partners through regular meetings and dialogue, demonstrating a commitment to rebuilding trust and co-operation—that word “trust” is so important.

In conclusion, the question of whether the UK should rejoin the European Union is complex and multifaceted. There are compelling arguments on both sides, and it is essential that we consider the potential benefits and challenges carefully. As we move forward, it is crucial that we engage in open and honest discussions, taking into account the diverse perspectives in our society. The Government's efforts to strengthen relations with the EU since July demonstrate a commitment to finding common ground and building a more co-operative future. Ultimately, the decision whether to rejoin the European Union must be made with careful consideration of the long-term interests of our country. Let us continue to engage in this important dialogue and work together to shape a prosperous and secure future for the United Kingdom.

I conclude by thanking again the lead petitioner and all those who signed this important petition. I look forward to hearing the views of all right hon. and hon. Members.

Several hon. Members rose—

David Mundell (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called. This is a three-hour debate, so I do not intend to set a time limit at this stage, but I ask Members to be mindful of others.

4.45 pm

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell. We are at a key geopolitical moment, which encompasses both economic issues and security and defence issues. Britain leaving the EU has damaged our economy. That is not a supposition; it is a fact. The Office for Budget Responsibility, the watchdog the Government are beholden to listen to for economic forecasts, says that our economy has been reduced by 4% because of Brexit. We can also look at the trade deals—for example, with Australia—that were held up and touted as a benefit of Brexit. We would have to look very hard, with a very powerful microscope, to see the bump in the UK GDP figures that we gained from the Australian trade deal, but we do not need to look hard to see our farmers' anger and ire about the changes to food safety standards and the agricultural market in the UK.

Small business owners I speak to in my community of Tunbridge Wells are absolutely appalled by Brexit. No matter what their small business is—whether they sell books, grow and export apples, or make art—Brexit has been a disaster.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): My hon. Friend mentioned small businesses. As a small business owner who imports goods from the European Union, I see at first hand how things that used to take days to import now take weeks. We used to require a purchase order and an invoice as the sole bits of paperwork, but we now have to fill in complicated forms, which is very costly. Those costs are put on small businesses with absolutely no benefit, and they have to be passed on to consumers. It is damaging our economy every single day. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is certainly not a benefit of Brexit?

Mike Martin: Marvellous! Ladies and gentlemen, that was a perfect example. I could list example after example of small business owners who say, "You know what? We have had to stop 20% of our business. We are no longer able to turn a profit on it because of the time we have to spend filling out forms."

I will move on from the direct effects of Brexit on our trade with the European Union to its wider effects. One thing we see in the current geopolitical moment is the threat of tariffs. If we are honest, we probably thought we had seen the back of those in the early 1930s. But we are in this new world, which includes the United Kingdom becoming a target for tariffs from our supposed closest ally. We have seen a supine response from the British Government to the setting of tariffs against our steel industry. We are a market of 70 million people and the sixth largest economy in the world, but were we part of a market of several hundred million people—the largest trading area on the planet—would we be so supine?

EU membership is about not just economics but security, which Brexit has damaged in many small ways. I speak, of course, of intelligence sharing and access to databases—the sharing of data across borders. We used to have the Dublin convention, which allowed us to negotiate the return of refugees, in a way that is not open to us now.

However, damaging our relationship with Europe has damaged us in a more profound way, which is being exposed by the actions of the Trump Government, who are withdrawing the American security guarantee

for Europe. We can quibble about whether that is happening, but the comments this weekend from Steve Witkoff should certainly give us pause for thought, and we should at least consider it a significant possibility. The Americans' removal of that security guarantee exposes us all, and I will give hon. Members a very real example that happened just last week. The EU set up a defence fund that put money into European defence industries to pump-prime them and get them building equipment and munitions, but the UK has been excluded because we are not a member of the EU. We can quibble about the politics of that fund and about whether France's role in it was right for European defence, but 20% of the European defence industry—the UK's defence industry—is separated from the money that will buy all that kit.

I will conclude by focusing on the economy and security, which are interlinked: a strong economy enables us to build strong defences, and the stability created by security and defence, appropriately deployed, allows economies to grow. It is also true that the money invested in defence helps our economy to grow, and Brexit is stopping us doing that. We must forge a closer relationship with Europe so the UK can start to shape the future, rather than have the future shape us.

4.52 pm

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) for opening the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee.

Banbury has a proud history as a hub for industry and manufacturing, from the aluminium works, which were crucial to the construction of aircraft during world war two, and which my grandfather later worked at, to the automotive supply chains, green tech start-ups and Formula 1 teams that call my constituency home today. Those companies and many others rely on smooth, efficient trade with the European Union.

The psychodrama of the final eight years of the last Conservative Government culminated in a botched Brexit deal that put up barriers to trade, soured relations with our closest allies and ultimately left our constituents out of pocket, so I welcome the reset in relations between the United Kingdom and the European Union that has taken place since the general election. We have a real opportunity to forge a new, more constructive relationship with our European friends.

Hundreds of constituents have written to me, signed petitions—including this one—and spoken to me on the doorstep about the damage that Brexit has caused. I have also had the privilege of hearing from and meeting business owners across Banbury who once enjoyed seamless access to European markets but now feel buried under the very paperwork and bureaucracy that Brexiteers once promised to eliminate.

Take, for example, Electric Assisted Vehicles Ltd, an exciting Banbury-based company manufacturing electric-assisted bikes. Those bikes represent the future of urban green transport, a sector in which the UK could be leading. However, instead of expanding easily across Europe, as EAV once could, it now faces an avalanche of paperwork. It has told me that what was once a single-page document is now 20 pages. That is a clear and direct demonstration of the previous Government's failure to deliver a Brexit deal that works for British business.

[*Sean Woodcock*]

Consider the BMW plant down the road in Oxford, a cornerstone of the UK automotive industry. When I spoke to workers alongside my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) a few weeks ago, it became clear that Brexit was a key factor in BMW shifting production away from the UK and towards the EU and China. The reality is that multinational manufacturers now find it cheaper and easier to downsize their workforces in the UK than in European counterparts. That is not a situation we should accept.

Banbury is home to a network of key automotive suppliers, including Magna Exteriors, Faurecia, HBPO and Borg & Beck, all of which rely on just-in-time supply chains in Europe. When delays at borders increase costs, additional import-export paperwork slows down deliveries, and rules of origin requirements limit market access, it is British workers who suffer.

Under the current UK-EU trade and co-operation agreement, goods must comply with certain rules of origin regulations to qualify for tariff-free trade. That is creating new challenges for businesses, particularly manufacturers, that previously enjoyed seamless trade with the European Union. For example, a UK-based bus manufacturer exporting to the EU must ensure that at least 55% of the vehicle's value is derived from UK or EU components, but many manufacturers rely on parts from outside the UK and the EU, making it harder to meet that requirement. Rejoining the Pan-Euro-Mediterranean convention would ease those constraints, keeping manufacturers in European and global markets. If we rejoined the PEM, components sourced from all 51 PEM countries would count as local content, making it easier for British businesses to qualify for tariff-free trade. That would be particularly beneficial for the automotive, chemical, pharmaceutical and machinery sectors.

Although rejoining the PEM will not solve all the post-Brexit trade issues, it is a practical and immediate step towards restoring smoother trade flows. It would signal to the EU that the UK is serious about improving trade relations while staying outside the customs union and the single market, which were referred to earlier.

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): I support my hon. Friend's encouragement for the UK to accede to the pan-Euro-Mediterranean convention. I was at a meeting last week of the UK-EU Parliamentary Partnership Assembly in Brussels, which issued a recommendation to explore options for closer customs co-operation and alignment of regulatory standards—that goes further than the current UK Government position—to facilitate trade and economic growth. That could include, for example, UK accession to the Pan-Euro-Mediterranean convention, so I hope very much that my hon. Friend is pushing at an open door with both the UK and the European Union.

Sean Woodcock: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution. As I said, we have an opportunity to reduce barriers to trade, support manufacturing, attract investment and rebuild a closer relationship with Europe. The Government have rightly set a mission of making the UK the fastest-growing economy in the G7 by the end of this Parliament, and I believe that joining the PEM would be a logical step towards achieving that goal.

4.58 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The end of January marked five years since the UK left the EU. Although a majority of people in the UK, and indeed in Wales, voted to leave the EU at that time, the majority do not think it was a good idea any more. Polling shows that 55% of Britons now say that it was wrong for the UK to leave the EU, with just 11% seeing Brexit as more of a success than a failure. Let us also not forget that young people voted decisively to remain.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Last week, I asked the Prime Minister whether he would negotiate a youth mobility scheme with the EU. He replied that we are not returning to free movement, but seemed to forget that we already have similar schemes with countries such as South Korea and Australia, based on work and travel for a specified duration of time. Does the right hon. Lady agree that a youth mobility scheme would mean not a return to free movement, but a fantastic opportunity to boost our economy and the prospects of people in Epsom and Ewell, and the rest of the UK?

Liz Saville Roberts: I absolutely agree. It is a priority for us as parliamentarians and for the Government to ensure that we do everything we can to widen the horizons for our young people and to give them the best opportunities.

According to polling data from YouGov, three quarters of 18 to 24-year-olds voted to stay in the European Union in 2016. There was a myth peddled at the time that they did not turn out to vote, but that is wrong: around 70% of registered young voters went to the polling booth. Nine years later, the next generation remains decisively opposed to Brexit, with 75% saying it was a mistake. As we look to the future, we must think seriously about the effect of the decision on young people who entered the workforce under its cloud, although many of them would not have been able to vote in 2016. What has “getting Brexit done” meant for them?

The UK no longer allows young people to take part in the Horizon Europe or Erasmus+ programmes, which is a huge loss to students the length and breadth of the UK. Those vital exchanges provided opportunities for young people to live and study in other countries, and their many benefits included improved language skills, cultural immersion and personal growth, leaving the sort of memories that stayed with somebody for ever.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): My right hon. Friend makes a very important point. University towns in communities such as mine benefited from those cultural exchanges, and visitors from the EU enriched many of our communities.

Liz Saville Roberts: The January poll by YouGov that I quoted earlier notes that everybody sees that tourism has been hit—by fewer people from the UK going to the EU as tourists and fewer people from the EU coming to the UK. In areas such as my hon. Friend's in Ceredigion and mine in Gwynedd, tourism provides the chief employment in our economy, along with the universities.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): Harrogate relies on tourism too. Local businesses that used to employ people coming over from the EU say

that they are now struggling to recruit, so they have had to shut up and close early, which has cost jobs. Does the right hon. Lady agree that a return to freedom of movement to allow those opportunities would benefit those businesses, which might help the Chancellor with the mission for growth?

Liz Saville Roberts: Indeed. Ensuring that there is a workforce for leisure and tourism is proving more and more challenging for a number of reasons, including the shortage of workers who previously came from the EU.

To return to Erasmus+, the Welsh Government made the decision to launch their own scheme in 2021. That was welcome, but the First Minister at the time, Mark Drakeford, said in February last year that

“if we had a choice we would much rather we were part of an established scheme”,
like Erasmus.

Disappointingly, the UK Government announced last summer that they have no plans to rejoin the Erasmus scheme, but I ask the Government to reconsider and look at recent successes in making closer ties with our neighbours. Calls for a youth mobility scheme have also been scorned by the UK Government. What is it about enriching young people's lives that frightens this Government so much?

Just this month, the UK marked an important milestone with Horizon Europe that indicates an alternative route. Since becoming an associated country in 2024, after three years of non-membership, the UK has boasted a strong performance in recent funding rounds. In particular, the UK hosted 18 successful projects under the European Research Council's synergy grants, the second highest number among participating countries. Ahead of the spring statement, when the Chancellor will undoubtedly be looking for opportunities to drive growth amid a dismal economic outlook, I urge the Government to find inspiration in our progress with Horizon and to pursue closer ties in further areas.

My party believes that returning to the single market and the customs union as soon as possible would be a meaningful step towards remedying the economic damage suffered by households and businesses alike. Recent figures by the Economic Cost of Brexit Project show that the average person in the UK is now £2,000 worse off as a result of leaving the European Union, worsening the effects of the ongoing cost of living crisis.

Five years on from our exit from the EU, the world is a more uncertain, more dangerous and less predictable place. From my home in Morfa Nefyn in north-west Wales, the closest capital city is Dublin. Our nearest neighbours for everyone, everywhere in the United Kingdom, are in the EU. The benefits of closer ties with our neighbours and our allies are plain to see, and I urge the Government to take heart from recent successes such as Horizon Europe and to pursue the same bold approach on youth mobility, on Erasmus, and on the customs union and single market.

5.5 pm

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) for introducing this important debate, which proves the importance of the petition mechanism to the public for getting important issues debated in this place. Eight years ago, constituents in Macclesfield voted to remain part

of the European Union. It was a referendum based on imperfect knowledge. It was called because of the internal politics of the Conservative party and in an attempt to see off the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) and his insistent Europhobe right—a group of people who would never be satisfied, as we subsequently discovered.

The context of calling that referendum was incredibly bizarre, as we had already been through the life-or-death experience of the Scottish referendum that put the UK's constitutional future at stake. It was also called in the wake of the Russian annexation of Crimea, so it was a bizarre time to be holding a question on the fundamental membership of an important political and economic alliance. We know how that referendum developed: it was vitriolic, and undoubtedly influenced by the Russians. Just a few days before the vote, one of our colleagues was tragically murdered on the streets of the UK.

We can now clearly see the consequences of our decision, as Members have been pointing out expertly this afternoon. Some 14,000 of 100,000 firms surveyed by the London School of Economics have quit trading with the European Union altogether. Many small businesses in my constituency talk about the barriers, the red tape and the bureaucracy that other Members have mentioned.

The National Institute of Economic and Social Research points out that foreign direct investment has fallen 37%, and the OBR has said that the UK economy will be 4% smaller in 2035—that scary figure of the lost 4% is in all our minds—than it would have been had the UK stayed in the EU. That is a cumulative loss of hundreds of billions of pounds that we could be spending on our infrastructure, our public services and our collective defence.

As we went into the election last year, the Government ruled out rejoining the EU and reopening those constitutional questions in this Parliament. It was a manifesto that I stood on and that I am committed to. I understand some of the reasoning behind that, because although the debate will go on about that political choice, we must remember how painful the situation was immediately after the referendum—the business uncertainty and anxiety, the jobs that had been secure that were suddenly insecure, and the investment decisions that were cancelled. A Damoclean sword of unpredictability hung over us, so I understand the trepidation about reopening those questions.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman has set out clearly the concerns that many people have. I am a proud Brexiteer, but we did not get the Brexit that we voted for. Does he agree that the people of Northern Ireland are subject to all the same bureaucracy, high tariffs and cost factors that he has outlined? Does he share the concerns that I have as an MP from Northern Ireland for his constituents?

Tim Roca: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, but I think he has proved the point that I made, which is that the people who voted for Brexit were a group who would never be satisfied, because Brexit meant different things to different people. It was whatever illusion—whatever fantasy—people wanted it to be, which is why it was so dangerous to let that nationalist genie out of the bottle in the way that we did.

I welcome the Government's effort to reset relations with the European Union, our neighbours and our allies, through a new forthcoming sanitary and phytosanitary

[*Tim Roca*]

agreement, supporting artists' ability to tour in the EU, a mutual recognition agreement for professional qualifications, and a new UK-EU security pact. Those are all really important, but I note that we would have had them if we had continued to be members of the European Union.

I welcome the Government's commitment to resetting those relationships, but as Members have said, let us go further. Let us look at the youth mobility scheme, let us join the pan-Euro-Mediterranean convention and ease barriers to trade, and let us lay the groundwork for a proper debate on where the future of this country should be.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful set of arguments. In Bournemouth we have a strong English language school sector, but it has been bashed by Brexit red tape. Younger people from across the continent are now struggling to reach Bournemouth to get a glimpse of Britain and all that we offer. Does my hon. Friend agree that alongside a youth mobility scheme we should consider getting rid of some of that Brexit red tape so that we can strengthen that sector, and bring younger people to Bournemouth and to Britain so that they can enjoy all of what our great country has?

Tim Roca: Absolutely. My hon. Friend is already proving a powerful advocate for his constituency and for young people. He points out again the issue of red tape and bureaucracy, which we were meant to be getting rid of with the amazing panacea of Brexit.

I still wholeheartedly believe in us rejoining the European Union—that is our future—and debates like this are part of that process. People need be under no illusion that this issue is going away; as the petitioners and those supporting them prove, this debate is ongoing in the country. There is also strong support, as the polling evidence shows, that the public believe that we made a mistake.

Let us look at what we threw away. We had those amazing dual pillars to support our place in the world: our strong position within the European Union and our amazing transatlantic alliance, which was mentioned earlier. We demolished one pillar and we have hollowed out the other, because we do not have a national defence that is strong enough for these dangerous times. We are now also in the midst of a trade war, having deliberately left one of the most powerful trade alliances that exists.

This debate is part of a journey, and I hope that more people will join us on that journey. The future of this country—our security, our prosperity, our culture and our relationship with our neighbours—depends on us having these difficult discussions. We must recognise the mistake that we made and the fraud that was committed on the British people, and change course.

5.11 pm

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell. I thank the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) for opening this debate and all those who signed the petition.

I will start by declaring an interest: I am a product of the European Union project—or the European Community, as it was called when I came to the UK at the age of 19 as a young student from Italy, just after John Major's Government signed the Maastricht treaty. I am immensely proud to stand here today to represent my wonderful constituency of Stratford-on-Avon.

I worked as a lecturer for many years. I saw at first hand the importance of collaborative research projects with our colleagues in EU universities, as well as the positive impact of Horizon and of Erasmus+, which is the biggest programme of youth opportunities in the world.

Abtisam Mohamed (Sheffield Central) (Lab): In Sheffield Central we have two large universities. The UK having left the European Union has had an impact on not only students coming to the UK, but the financial sustainability of universities. Does the hon. Member agree that the Turing and Erasmus schemes do not go far enough? To support our universities with more students from the EU, we should encourage a stronger relationship—better than Turing—perhaps through a youth mobility scheme.

Manuela Perteghella: I fully agree with the hon. Member. Turing is not the same as Erasmus, because it is not reciprocal. That is one of the things that limits the opportunities for our students. Erasmus+ is not just about university exchanges; it is a programme that includes opportunities for our disadvantaged young people. Joining Erasmus+ would allow those young people in disadvantaged areas to have better life opportunities through exchanges, volunteering, training and school links.

Brexit has brought nothing but barriers for my constituents and for people across the United Kingdom. Small businesses, including plant and horticultural businesses, are drowning in red tape and incurring new taxes and expenses. Farmers have been undercut by damaging trade deals and the ending of the sustainable farming incentives that were a key part of the post-Brexit payment scheme that replaced EU subsidies.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not only vets and farmers who are extremely proud that we have some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world, but the British public? We should not compromise those farming standards and any trade deals that may occur in the future should not undermine them either.

Manuela Perteghella: Absolutely. The Government need to stand up for our British farmers, and that includes during the negotiation of trade deals—which, by the way, should be brought to Parliament to be fully scrutinised.

Young people have lost opportunities to study, live, travel, work and fall in love—as I myself did many years ago. Our creative industries, once thriving on European collaboration, now face restrictions and uncertainty, with artists, musicians and performers unable to tour their own continent. A priority must be not only to rejoin Erasmus+ but to create a youth mobility scheme, as many Members have discussed today.

We must have a credible roadmap to rebuild trust and ties with our European neighbours. We must start by deepening co-operation on climate, research, security and education, and we must then negotiate a new trade

deal that includes a customs union to bring down the barriers holding our economy back. Ultimately, as Liberal Democrats, we want to rejoin the single market and restore the freedoms that our constituents deserve.

However, this is not just about trade; it is about values, opportunities, who we are and the role we choose to play in the world. With Trump and Putin now both a threat to our security, as already mentioned by my hon. Friends and other hon. Members, we must stand shoulder to shoulder with our friends in the European Union. As Europe rises to defend peace and democracy in the free world, the UK must not be a bystander. We must lead from the front, working with our European friends and allies to strengthen our shared economic prosperity and national security.

5.17 pm

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Mundell. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) on setting out the nature of this debate so well.

May I tell my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) that many of us who were here during the Brexit negotiations and remember the pain of those evenings—as well as the fisticuffs—know only too well that the scars cut deep? That is also why Robert, who I congratulate on his petition, needs to know the truth. If the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) was in the country, I am sure that he would be telling all of us that we need straight talking, so let us have some straight talking.

Brexit is a disaster. It is a disaster by anybody's metric, not least those according to whom it was purported to be a route to the promised land. The pandemic spared some of the blushes of those who still try to claim that we have got some elusive sovereignty as a result of leaving the European Union, but we can see the damage. Our constituents can see the damage.

Many Members have already cited some of the relevant figures; let me cite some more. As a result of Brexit, 1.8 million fewer jobs have been created in our economy, and that number is likely to rise to 3 million by 2035. Some 16,500 small businesses have stopped exporting to Europe all together. Those of us who were part of the parliamentary delegation last week had the pleasure of listening to Lord Frost trying to argue that up was down, but we know the truth for our constituents. We have seen the damage.

Indeed, we have seen that what was a bad situation in leaving the European Union was compounded by the ways in which the previous Administration chose to leave it. What on earth made them decide that we would not even share security alerts with our colleagues in Europe? How on earth is it in the interests of British farmers to not even share food security alerts with our colleagues, simply because the system had the word "Europe" in the title? The border operating model is adding billions of pounds to the cost of food in this country. What on earth made them think that adding £145 every time that a pallet of food came over here was somehow in the interests of British consumers or indeed British businesses? And that is before we even get on to the uncertain geopolitical situation that we are in. By any metric, it is easy to understand why Robert brought forward the petition.

To me, the Brexiteers are like those people—we all have met them on a night out—who join the group, start a fight in the club and get everyone kicked out, but who still maintain, three hours later, as they are walking everyone around a completely empty industrial estate somewhere, that they know a great club that everyone can get into. The challenge for those of us who recognise the damage done to this country—the damage to our national reputation and to our economies, communities and values from the idea that our European neighbours and friends would feel in any way unwelcome—is that we do not want to be that weirdo who says, "Well, if we walk around the streets a few more times, we can go back. It's fine: the bouncers won't recognise us; we can walk back in." The brutal reality is that we have left the European Union, and we owe it to people who care about this country—I think everybody in this Chamber does, even if they still purport to believe that Brexit was a good idea—to talk truths to our constituents and work out what we can do to salvage what is left. That is what today's debate is all about.

Nobody here is saying that rejoining should be the sole priority of the Government. We know full well that, because we are facing a salvage operation, Europe will only talk to us once more. Who can blame them? For years, we were like that difficult, awkward man our aunt married, who turned up at Christmas and always caused a fuss—and thank God she divorced him. Now we appear acting as if nothing has changed and that we should be invited to Sunday lunch. We owe respect to our colleagues in Europe when they are dealing with challenges such as Putin and economic uncertainty, and looking at what we can all do to secure peace in the middle east. They are owed some respect from us, and although sometimes it appears, frankly, as if we think our colleagues in Europe do not read our newspapers, I promise that they do.

The challenge for all of us is that we owe truth to our colleagues in Europe and truth to our constituents. It would take years to renegotiate to rejoin the European Union, even if we were to get a fast-tracked arrangement and they could be confident that we would not change our mind again. I recognise that the public are far ahead of politicians in this debate, including all of us scarred by those Brexit years. It would take years, because it would mean going around every individual country. It is worth remembering that our membership of the European Union was vetoed twice by France, because that is the way the process works. It is not a quick process. Those of us who are passionate about our relationship with Europe and what is possible—I stand here as chair of the Labour movement for Europe—hold our constituents in our hearts, and they need us to do what we can in the next 18 months, or else the damage that Brexit has done to the country will be so irreparable that there will be little left to negotiate.

Rachael Maskell: I am grateful for all that my hon. Friend has done on this issue. Does she agree that it would be really helpful now, nine years on, to have a comprehensive impact assessment? In 2016, we talked about the projected harm that Brexit would cause. Now that we have the evidence, should Government prepare an assessment, so that we can make sound judgments on the basis of that?

Ms Creasy: I do not disagree with my hon. Friend, but it is so plain to see how we have cut ourselves off. Even in the pandemic, and initially standing up to Putin

[*Ms Creasy*]

in Ukraine, we were outside the room shouting in. We owe it to our constituents now to be as brutal as we can be and humble as we need to be to make the case for what we can do in the next 18 months.

Fred Thomas (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Ms Creasy: I just want to say a little more on that, because I am supremely conscious of time. The previous Administration chose to walk us out of any foreign affairs co-operation. That includes not just hard power, but soft power. For us in the Labour movement for Europe, it is an utter priority to secure a defence and security co-operation agreement, and to include aid in that conversation. Europe is the third largest donor around the world. Whatever one thinks of the cuts to the aid budget, duplication is a problem, but so too is separation, when looking at how we can stand up to threats we face around the world.

We absolutely must join the Pan-Euro-Mediterranean convention, as my colleagues have pointed out. These times call for moving on from talk of red lines to talk of mutual benefit. With the uncertainty and inconsistency of whoever is in the White House, our constituents need us to remember a simple truth about Brexit: we can fight many things in life, but we cannot fight geography. Trade with our neighbours is always going to be critical to the future economy, so we must do what we can to reduce the trade barriers.

Some of us were into the youth mobility scheme before it was fashionable; and some of us, over a year ago, were arguing for it. We consider that it is absolutely in the interests of the British public to get one. We do not believe what came back last summer was the right deal for this country, but we should absolutely be looking at what is possible. In that conversation, we must prioritise our apprenticeships. I am old enough to remember when this country used to celebrate, as part of our national cultural life, young men from the north-east going to Germany to upskill and train. That programme was called “Auf Wiedersehen, Pet”, and I am sure the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was a regular viewer. That was absolutely youth mobility at the time.

Our young people in this country did not vote for this situation, and they should not bear the brunt of it. They need us to fight for every opportunity that can come for them. A youth mobility deal—not freedom of movement, because we can control how people come here—which we already have with other countries, is in their interest if it is not just about students. Let us talk about every young person.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I am a former Erasmus exchange student and have personal lived experience of the immense opportunities that youth mobility provides. Does my hon. Friend recognise not only that it would create significant opportunities for British students abroad, as well as for European students potentially coming to the UK, but that it would not fundamentally rub up against the red lines in the Labour manifesto last year? Youth mobility does not provide a pathway to citizenship, it is not freedom of movement and it does not provide for financial dependency on the state.

Ms Creasy: My hon. Friend is absolutely right on all fronts. A youth mobility or opportunity scheme with apprenticeships at its heart is the right thing to do, and crucially—in the timeline I have set out for the salvation of this country and for salvaging something from the damage Brexit has done—it could be achieved within an 18-month window. One final item to add to the list of things we could do in 18 months is about our energy security, in particular the emissions trading scheme and the carbon border adjustment mechanism. For many of us, for our vital industries and for defence, including steel, it is absolutely critical that we get our CBAM and emissions trading schemes aligned.

Aneurin Bevan told us that

“The language of priorities is the religion of socialism.”

I stand here, ruthlessly prioritising the British interest, which was always about being stronger and taller on the world stage, and being confident that we could work with other countries. Never more have we needed that spirit, but never more have we needed to be clear about what needs to be done and when. I recognise the passion behind this petition; I simply say to those petitioning: let us not fall into the Brexiteers’ trap of offering false hope, when the people in this country need real change, real relationships and real solutions. The hon. Member for Clacton may not be here, but his spirit infuses our debate if we do otherwise.

5.28 pm

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell.

By parliamentary standards, this may not be an enormous petition, nor has it attracted almost 3 million signatures, like the recent one calling for another general election. However, it is still significant, and is on a subject that has gone from being all we ever talked about to one we now barely even mention. Those of us with dark red areas on the petition map will know, however, that this issue has not disappeared from our constituents’ hearts and minds. As far as many of us are concerned, Brexit is not and has never been a done deal, never to be spoken of again—almost 400 of my constituents have signed and written to me about it.

From campaigning against Brexit during the referendum to working day and night, including on the first sitting Saturday in 40 years, many of us tried and came so close to securing a less awful deal and a people’s vote. Almost every Labour Member met to discuss and scrutinise every stage and every amendment, led in group meetings several times a day by the current Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology and the Secretary of State for Education; the now Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster; the Minister for Employment, the hon. Member for Birkenhead (Alison McGovern); and the now Minister of State for Europe and North America, the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty). I would love to believe that those Government Ministers are now applying our years of campaigning together against the damage we foresaw Brexit causing to our national security, economy and place in the world in their new roles, raising those issues in Cabinet and departmental meetings at every available opportunity.

According to the recent YouGov survey that has been mentioned, 55% of Britons now say it was wrong to for the UK to leave the EU, and just 11% see Brexit as more of a success than a failure. That mirrors the 2016

referendum result in my constituency, where the University of Kent, our largest employer, enjoyed an extremely close working partnership with our neighbours across the English channel, not just on research projects, but with campuses on the continent that have sadly now been closed completely. Gone is the once proud sign that read, “University of Kent: the European university”. Gone, too, are many of our friends, neighbours, academics and language teachers, who made Canterbury their home for decades. The diverse demographic mix has changed. Group bookings at local restaurants, the cathedral, guest houses and tourist attractions have fallen dramatically, and our city centre just feels like a different place. Thankfully, we are a resourceful city, used to welcoming pilgrims of all kinds, and we are adjusting, but Brexit punched us heavily, and it hurt.

Canterbury is closer to Europe than to many UK cities, and we have more in common with it than we do with many of them; we have such close ties in so many parts of our local economy. Aside from our social, economic and sentimental ties in east Kent, the national urgency for closer official ties could not be more timely, as shifting global alliances and instability are highlighted every day. We must get closer once again to our friends and allies in the EU. That is, of course, a political decision. It is a matter of leadership and of making the case politically and based on facts. Our trade opportunities and international standing, and our very security, depend on us showing political leadership. This is the basic requirement of political premiers—

Fred Thomas: The hon. Member talks about political leadership, and I understand that. While we can all agree that Brexit has been an almost unmitigated disaster, the Labour party manifesto said that we will not go back into the EU, the customs union or the single market. That is the manifesto that I and all of us on this side of the Chamber stood on. You talk about leadership; do you agree that it is important for politicians to honour the manifesto they stood on?

David Mundell (in the Chair): Order. You are asking for the views of the hon. Lady, not me.

Rosie Duffield: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, but there are plenty of things that the Labour Government seem to be pushing through that were not in the manifesto. The people now in charge were campaigning, with those of us who were here then, against Brexit several years ago, and I would like them to stick to that.

Our trade opportunities and international standing, and our very security, depend on us showing political leadership. This is the basic requirement of political premiers: taking decisions—not just tough decisions on the economy, but bold, swift, courageous decisions during shifting geopolitical circumstances. Our tourism, arts, farming, university and financial sectors need help. It is time that this Government took some of those bold decisions, not only to reflect the will of those they represent, but to protect and secure the best future for the generations who depend on us to deliver it.

5.33 pm

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) for opening the debate.

My constituents in Rushcliffe have long been outward-looking, internationally minded and overwhelmingly pro-European. They understand that Brexit has not delivered the promised benefits, and they feel that the economic, social and geopolitical consequences of Brexit can be seen in their daily lives. I thank the 311 people from my constituency who signed the petition, and congratulate the lead petitioner for bringing us to the point of debating this matter today.

As so many of my colleagues have already said, it is clear that the UK’s trade has suffered, its productivity has fallen and investment has stalled since it left the EU. We have heard about the OBR estimates, but I believe that Goldman Sachs suggests that UK GDP has fallen by an even greater amount—maybe 5% or even up to 8%—and is therefore lower than it would have been without Brexit. One of my colleagues has already referenced the fact that 1.8 million fewer jobs were created by 2023. Our small businesses, in particular in sectors like agrifood and manufacturing, are bearing the brunt of new barriers to trade. We have also heard that 16,400 small businesses have ceased exporting to the EU since 2021.

For my constituents, those are not abstract figures; ultimately, they translate into higher prices at the checkout, fewer opportunities for our young people and, for all of us, diminished global influence. However, although rejoining the EU is a goal for many in my constituency, and a position that I would like us to pursue, we must be pragmatic about the challenges that that process will entail.

Katie White (Leeds North West) (Lab): I think the vast majority of people in the room and, certainly, across my constituency have their eyes open to the challenges of Brexit and the obstacles we faced. Does my hon. Friend agree that the world has changed and that, in the new world order, what is possible for Europe, including our own country, will change too? As he says, we need pragmatic and creative solutions to strengthen and protect our place in an increasingly uncertain world. Does he agree that a new bargain, in which we have access to the single market in exchange for security assurances and a mechanism for reasonable, but not legally required, regulatory alignment, where the benefits outweigh the costs—not with free movement—could be a route forward?

James Naish: The reality is that there are several routes forward, and a number of them have been mentioned today. I implore the Government to think creatively about them. I will come to a couple of my own suggestions in a moment.

Rejoining would be a long and complex journey. It would require unanimous agreement from all 27 EU member states, and we would need to demonstrate sustained public and cross-party support over several years. I say this as someone who, in 2013-14, was living in Albania and working for the Government there. Albania became an official candidate for accession to the EU in June 2014; 10 years on, it is not a member.

Pete Wishart: I do not think that anyone in this Chamber, or the petitioners, expects the Labour party to lead us back into the EU tomorrow. What we want to hear from this Labour Government is a commitment that that is their objective and that is what they will work towards.

James Naish: It is forward movement and momentum that many of my constituents want to see. I will come to a couple of the things that I think could be done to achieve that.

We cannot afford to wait 10 years to address some of the very real challenges that we face as a country. Practical, tangible steps can be taken to help to build a stronger and closer relationship with the EU. Many of those things have already been mentioned, including negotiating a security and defence partnership to co-operate on international development, and access to the EU's new €150 billion defence financing instrument. We could reach a veterinary agreement to reduce costly border checks. We could join the pan-Euro-Mediterranean convention. We could align on emissions trading schemes with the EU, to avoid costly charges to UK exporters. We could explore a youth mobility scheme, as we have with countries such as Australia and Canada, so that the next generation can build relationships and young people can have the chance to work, study and build connections across Europe.

Those measures would not only strengthen our economic ties, but restore trust and co-operation with our European partners at a time of geopolitical uncertainty. Russia's aggression continues to grow, and global challenges are significant, so closer collaboration between the UK and the EU is not just desirable, but essential for our security and prosperity.

Next year, 2026, will mark 10 years since the Brexit vote. As I have said to many constituents on the doorstep, I can picture the newspaper columns, TV programmes and extensive discussion that will take place as we approach June 2026. I believe that it is a perfect time for a national conversation about what our future relationship with Europe looks like, and I am sure that many Members present will want to be part of that conversation.

Tom Hayes: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, in particular on that point about our nearing the decade anniversary. Does he agree that, in some senses, we need to put the vote behind us and reflect on the management of the Brexit decision? It is hard to believe that I will say this often, but does he agree with the Leader of the Opposition, who said in her 2025 new year speech:

"We announced that we would leave the European Union before we had a plan for growth outside the EU... These mistakes were made because we told people what they wanted to hear first and then tried to work it out later?"

James Naish: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the position has changed. There were a lot of mistakes. We do not need to go back to the past and examine all that, but I think we will need a national conversation about where our relationship with Europe is in 2026. Indeed, we are having that conversation today, but I feel that that will be a natural springboard, 10 years on from the vote, and I sincerely hope that, as a nation, we take that conversation to heart.

My constituents in Rushcliffe understand that Britain is strongest when it is connected, co-operative and engaged with its European neighbours. My constituents expect us in this House, and the Government, to act decisively to help rebuild that relationship. That is the path we must take, and I implore the Government to think creatively about the best ways of doing that.

5.41 pm

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. The petition reflects how strongly the public—including the 367 in my constituency who signed it—feel about the UK's future relationship with Europe.

If we listen carefully, we can still hear echoes of the Tories' botched Brexit deal promises as whispers on the wind—"sunlit uplands", "global Britain", "endless opportunities"—but nearly five years after that deal came into effect, the sunlit uplands look suspiciously gloomy, global Britain seems isolated and the promised opportunities have become lost chances, especially for our young people.

The Government claim to be serious about growth yet they continue to ignore the most impactful step we could take: a UK-EU customs union. Entering a customs union would remove mountains of red tape, eliminate cumbersome rules of origin checks and unlock significant growth for businesses, both large and small. It would provide immediate relief for countless small and medium-sized enterprises suffocating under bureaucracy, and significantly boost our exports to our largest and nearest market.

Studies consistently show that aligning closely with European markets is overwhelmingly beneficial to British trade, employment and economic stability. A recent report from Best for Britain estimates that simply deeply aligning with the EU on goods and services could increase GDP by 1.7% to 2.2%. Why would we not want to do that? A bespoke customs union would also insulate us from Trump's irrational pro-tariff policies, which have already begun to harm our economic growth. Once that customs union is achieved, we should look to join the single market, which would provide even greater opportunities for growth.

Instead of grasping that opportunity, the Government are busy cutting welfare and slashing international aid—actions that weaken, rather than strengthen, our economy. Last week I attended the Parliamentary Partnership Assembly in Brussels, at which the Minister for the Constitution and European Union Relations, the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), was also present. The Assembly issued a joint statement that included the possibility of UK accession to the pan-Euro-Mediterranean convention, as referenced by the hon. Members for Chelsea and Fulham (Ben Coleman), for Macclesfield (Tim Roca), for Rushcliffe (James Naish) and for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy). Will the Minister confirm whether the Government are seriously considering that—and, if so, on what sort of timetable?

The Tories' botched Brexit deal has undoubtedly reduced opportunities, particularly for our youth. Young Brits can easily travel to and work in Canada, Australia or Japan, yet they are inexplicably blocked from France, Germany and Spain. Why? Because ideology trumps common sense. It is high time for a reciprocal youth mobility scheme with the EU—not a return to freedom of movement but a sensible, time-limited arrangement enabling young Brits to gain invaluable experiences abroad, like they used to, and like many of us grew up with. Such a scheme would be a clear win-win, benefiting the UK and the EU.

The tourism industry was once thriving, with enthusiastic young Brits keen to explore and work in Europe, but now faces severe labour shortages. Hospitality, retail and the

arts have similarly suffered, deprived of the vibrant exchange of talent and ideas that once powered innovation and cultural enrichment. A youth mobility scheme is not only desirable, but an economic and strategic necessity.

Just recently, representatives from our legal services sector highlighted to me the significant challenges they face without mobility for young professionals. A youth mobility scheme would allow aspiring British lawyers and other professionals to work across Europe, boosting our exports of expertise, generating growth and enhancing Britain's reputation for excellence internationally.

In her comments, will the Minister clarify whether the Government have any plans to negotiate such an arrangement, regardless of whether it is called a youth exchange, experience or mobility scheme—I am not too concerned about how it is branded—and, crucially, to treat it as a serious priority?

Farmers have encountered unprecedented bureaucratic obstacles when exporting to Europe, leading to a decline in overall exports in an already struggling industry. That is why we must negotiate a phytosanitary and veterinary agreement with urgency.

The current deal's negative impact stretches even further. Just recently, the EU announced €150 billion for defence procurement, potentially rising to €800 billion in the coming years. That is funding from which the UK is completely excluded, meaning that billions of euros in research, innovation, high-skilled employment opportunities and global competitiveness will be lost because of sheer political stubbornness.

Dr Chambers: Some of the greatest challenges facing civilisation right now include climate change, how we feed 8 billion people and give them energy sustainably, the risk of pandemics, and antimicrobial resistance. Does my hon. Friend agree that barriers to research are not only damaging our universities and industries, but hindering the tackling of these huge problems?

James MacCleary: Yes, and my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Manuela Perteghella) spoke about that at length. Those barriers are clearly harming not only the UK research environment, but the global research environment. At a time when academics in the United States are being hounded out of universities and looking for other places to take their expertise, Europe is an obvious place to go. That could benefit our country substantially and, indeed, address the challenges my hon. Friend the Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) outlines.

Does the Minister agree that in order to counteract issues around defence procurement in particular, we must negotiate a UK-EU defence pact that ensures that Britain remains central to collective decisions about continental security, particularly during Putin's barbaric war in Ukraine? Our exclusion from crucial European programmes leads directly to reduced investment, fewer high-skilled jobs and diminished international standing, precisely when unity and strength are essential.

Speaking of the architects of the botched Brexit, where exactly is the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage)? According to *Hansard*, he has mentioned Brexit just twice since his election in July. Surely, if this Brexit deal was the monumental success that he and others promised, he would be reminding us no end of times. His silence speaks volumes. Even he seems aware that this supposed triumph is best quietly forgotten.

We want to see this country back at the heart of Europe, but we must be clear-eyed about how severely the Conservatives damaged the UK's relationship with our EU partners and how long it will take to rebuild. Trump's return to the White House and his appeasement of Putin add new urgency to that task. His aggressive trade and defence stance reminds us of just how crucial our European ties are, not just economically but strategically.

Our real strength comes from unity and partnership. Together, as part of a larger European community, we wield far greater influence, command substantially more resources and drive innovation more effectively than when we are standing alone. Shared European co-operation amplifies our ability to fund ambitious research and development, enhance collective security and promote our shared liberal democratic values globally. Far from diminishing our sovereignty, collaboration with Europe expands and reinforces it.

The Government must move beyond cherry-picking and timid gestures and take a bold strategic stance in their approach to Europe—one grounded in realism, ambition and the national interest. Their self-defeating red lines are holding our country back. They claim they will do "whatever it takes" for economic growth, and that must surely include ditching their nonsensical red lines.

British jobs and businesses, our international influence and our young people's futures depend on constructive engagement, not stubborn isolation. It is time for the Government to swallow their pride, to acknowledge reality and to begin rebuilding the bridges that the Tories so recklessly burned. Let us ensure that future generations inherit opportunities and co-operation, not barriers and isolation. Our young people deserve better. Our small businesses and our farmers deserve better. Britain deserves better.

5.50 pm

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) and fellow Welshman for securing this important debate.

Wales's agricultural sector is at the heart of our social fabric, employing more than 50,000 people. It is central to our economy, our food security and the preservation of our stunning countryside. Yet since Brexit, our farmers have faced severe challenges. Brexit has without doubt created significant challenges, particularly for trade relations.

The EU was, and remains, a critical trading partner for Wales, with a substantial 75% of Welsh food and drink exports destined for the trading bloc. However, a report from the Centre for Inclusive Trade Policy revealed that UK food and agricultural exports to the EU have dropped by more than 16% on average since we left the EU single market, which equates to a staggering £3 billion less in exports annually. The introduction of border checks for agrifood products and of regulatory hurdles has made it increasingly difficult for Welsh farmers to compete on a level playing field. Those changes have led to higher costs, delays and uncertainty, making it harder to maintain smooth supply chains, something that particularly affects our smaller businesses.

Moreover, Brexit's impact on labour shortages in the UK food industry has been severe, with a significant proportion of workers in the agrifood and meat sectors

[*Steve Witherden*]

coming from the EU. The reduced availability of workers has created operational challenges and pushed up production costs, further straining the financial stability of Welsh farms. Additionally, uncertainty about the future of subsidy structures and support mechanisms remains. The lack of clarity on agricultural policies across the UK has made Wales less attractive for inward investment, leaving businesses uncertain about what lies ahead.

The Tories let down our farmers time and again, signing disastrous trade deals with Australia and New Zealand, forcing more than 12,000 farmers and agribusinesses out of business since 2010 and mishandling the Brexit negotiations. Their failures have deepened the financial struggles of Welsh farmers, and we must learn from those mistakes. We must rebuild trust, repair the damage caused by rushed trade deals and fight for a fair and competitive post-Brexit trading environment. I therefore ask the Minister what consideration has been given to constituents such as mine in Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr, who rely heavily on a free, stable and healthy agricultural sector, in the Government's commitment to reset the UK's relationship with the European Union.

5.53 pm

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Mr Mundell. I congratulate the petitioners on securing this debate, and I thank the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) for his eloquent and passionate speech.

I fear that I am in danger of picking at the scars and wounds referred to by the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy)—a very learned Member—but I must reflect on these past nine years. On 23 June 2016, the people of Scotland voted to remain within the European Union by 62% to 38%. There was a majority for remain in every single one of Scotland's local authorities. In anyone's terms, that was decisive, and if the vote were rerun today, I suggest it would be even more decisive.

It is almost nine years since the disastrous misleading of the electorate by Gove, Johnson, Farage et al., and we might want to consider the extent to which this failure of democracy has increased support for Scottish independence—from 45% to 54% and rising. But still and all, democracy has been undermined in Scotland, because the imposition of the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020 restricted the previously agreed powers of the Scottish Parliament and ignored the Sewel convention by proceeding with UK legislation without the consent of the Scottish Parliament.

As a result of Brexit, we are a much poorer nation, at a time when we cannot afford to be poorer. That poverty equates to £3 billion in lost public revenues for Scotland each and every year since we left Europe.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): The hon. Member is of course right to talk about the economic impact of Brexit, but would it have been different if the vote had been won on our joining the customs union—a vote that the SNP abstained on?

Seamus Logan: I cannot comment, as I was not here at the time, but we will come back to the issue of the customs union in a moment.

The UK has endured the highest rate of inflation in the G7 for many months. Brexit has exacerbated the cost of living crisis, driving a £250 increase in annual household food bills. Food and drink inflation in 2023 was at a 45-year high, with food prices up by almost 25 percentage points between 2019 and 2023. Analysis suggests that a third of that increase is due to Brexit, meaning UK households have paid out almost £7 billion to cover the extra costs of overcoming trade barriers that make importing food from the EU harder.

No community has escaped, but inevitably it is our poorest families who are hurting the most. Our business community is also enduring increased costs and damaged trade. According to Scottish Government analysis, 44% of businesses in Scotland face difficulties trading overseas, and named Brexit as the main cause. They face significant additional costs and bureaucracy at a time when their margins are already being squeezed at home by decisions made here in Westminster. Our prized seafood industry has been hit with an estimated 50% increase in the cost of packaging items sent to the EU, and new export health certificates are costing the salmon sector alone approximately £1.3 million per year.

Liz Saville Roberts: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will join me in expressing dismay at the fact that, for the bivalve fishing industry, the waters of Wales were no longer acceptable, and that industry died with Brexit.

Seamus Logan: I thank the right hon. Member for that point. Our fishing industry has effectively lost quota share and has access to fewer fishing opportunities for some species than it had under the EU's common fisheries policy. That includes, for example, North sea whiting, where the maximum percentage of total EU and UK quota available is 73.5% compared with average UK landings in 2015 to 2019 of 82%. Even where quota has been gained through the TCA, much of it is for species that the Scottish fleet does not generally catch, or does not want to catch, making it of little practical value.

In the wider seafood sector, some shellfish exporters have estimated that the new barriers to trade with the EU have resulted in additional costs of £500 to £600 per consignment, making some exports unviable. Seafood Scotland has described post-Brexit labour shortages as having a huge impact on the seafood processing sector, with businesses turning down growth opportunities due to a lack of labour. We no longer enjoy freedom of movement—it has gone—despite the promises of the then candidate for leader of the Labour party in 2020, now the Prime Minister.

Some 45% of tourism businesses in the highlands and islands have reported staff shortages, forcing otherwise successful firms to cut their opening hours. In July 2022, UK Hospitality reported 40,000 hospitality vacancies in Scotland, but the sector is excluded from the UK Government's seasonal worker scheme. Recent media reporting found that one hotel in the highlands alone is short of 70 staff for the busy summer season. In response to an oral question recently, the Prime Minister told me he was fully aware of the labour shortages and was working to address them. I have two questions for the Minister when she winds up, and the first is: how exactly is the Prime Minister working to address those shortages?

[SIR JOHN HAYES *in the Chair*]

Travel is more difficult and costly as Brexit has slowed down the process of entering the EU on a British passport. Business travellers and holidaymakers report long delays at some airports and extremely long tailbacks at the port of Dover. Pets can be brought into the European area only with an animal health certificate, which must be issued by a vet and can cost between £100 and £300 per trip. Most mobile phone operators have reintroduced roaming charges, which were abolished for EU members in 2017. Perhaps most shamefully, our young people miss huge opportunities as a result of Brexit because, as many Members said, we are no longer participating in Erasmus+.

In summary, our democratic will is being ignored, we are poorer, the cost of living is climbing, business is suffering, we do not have enough workers, foreign travel is more difficult and expensive, and our young people have lost enormous opportunity. History will reserve an especially harsh judgment for those who misled us down this path. Paradoxically, we are now forced into closer defence relationships with our European allies and higher spending in the face of the growing threat of Russian aggression. But we cannot say that we were not warned that, while the creation of the European Union has been a bulwark for peace in Europe since 1945, its weakening would potentially threaten that peace.

In conclusion, I ask the question that we should all ask: who really benefited from Brexit? It certainly was not the ordinary people. But rather than speak about how bad this all is, let us do something about it. I feel a teeny, wee bit sorry for the Chancellor at the minute, but I am giving her a way out: rejoin the single market, rejoin the customs union and get the benefits that they offer.

6.1 pm

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under you today, Chair—I notice that you have got younger just in the last few minutes. [*Laughter.*] I hope it is orderly to flatter the Chair.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): Speak for as long as you like!

Dr Arthur: I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) for opening the debate so ably, and the many people in Edinburgh South West who signed this petition. I will speak briefly because what I was going to talk about has been well trod. Brexit has been an absolute tragedy for the UK, both economically and culturally. The Conservatives have taken a share of the blame today, along with Reform and its predecessor parties, but I have to be honest and say that when I think about how close the Brexit result was, I think about my party's leadership at that time. More could have been done, so some blame should certainly be shared there.

I came to this place last July from higher education, so I want to speak about the impact of Brexit on that sector. I do so in the context of my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I should also mention that Patrick Thomson from the University of Strathclyde is shadowing me today—which so far has largely involved drinking coffee when I drink coffee. In higher education, Brexit has been problematic. Fewer students now come from the EU to Scottish universities. That is primarily

not a money issue; it is about the diversity of thought within the classroom. It is a real problem and it leaves us all poorer. It is harder for universities to attract staff from the EU now. If we are serious about growing the economy, we need the best staff from around the world in our universities, and we should not be ashamed of that. I remember when we were going through the Brexit process, EU nationals were leaving universities and going back to Europe. That is a tragedy, and we should be ashamed of it.

Research funding from within the EU has got harder. I know it has improved slightly recently, but during the process it was difficult to build consortiums with a UK lead, and some partners were even worried about having UK universities within their consortiums, so we should not overlook the impact of that. Those problems only amplify the wider economic problems that Brexit has imposed on our economy, and they are felt more inside our university sector. I am pleased that the current Government are trying to rebuild relationships and get as close as possible with Europe. If we are doing that work and looking for trailblazers, that should be done within our universities, because there is much more that can be done to rebuild those relationships.

I support this petition on rejoining the EU as soon as possible, but what does “as soon as possible” mean? My hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy) explained that it could take many years of harmonisation, which is a real challenge for us; however, the bigger challenge is the division and acrimony that comes with referendums, because we would need a referendum to go back in. I have lived through the Scottish independence referendum and the Brexit referendum, both of which divided our communities and were toxic in many respects. They divided families, workplaces and even households, which is incredible. We have to start building the case right now if we are to avoid that situation happening again, and we must make the positive arguments for rejoining the EU. We should start making them from within universities, because that is where international collaboration works best.

I also think that people were not wrong to vote for Brexit, but they were misled, so we have to be honest with them about that. We must explain why things have not unfolded as they were promised by people not in this room today, who should be owning up to the tragedy that they created. We have to be honest, frank and transparent with people, and we have to lead this debate. Hopefully, after the next election, we can build up to that referendum to rejoin.

6.6 pm

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I thank the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) for introducing this debate, as well as everyone who signed the petition. We all know by now that, thanks to the Conservatives and their allies in Reform, the relationship between the UK, Wales and the EU has been severely damaged. Falling out with our neighbours is particularly self-defeating during this fracturing era of global politics, and Wales is paying a particularly heavy price for that fraying relationship.

We are a nation of manufacturers, small businesses and farmers, and those three sectors have been throttled by red tape, hindering our trade with the European Union.

[David Chadwick]

In my constituency, a small local business in Radnorshire that makes parts for classic motorcycles is heavily reliant on EU trade, yet over Christmas, with no warning from the Department for Business and Trade, it was told that it was now incompatible with EU directives. That is just one example of how Brexit-related bureaucracy is harming businesses and damaging trade with our neighbours.

Farmers and the food and drink industry across Wales are also waiting for the long-promised UK veterinary agreement. Studies show that such an agreement could boost UK agrifood exports to the EU by at least 22%, providing a vital boost to rural areas such as mine. However, we have still received no timeline from the current Labour Government on when that is likely to happen.

It is not just the economic impact, though, but the cultural and social loss for young people. I thank my good fortune that I had the opportunity to live and study at Leiden University in the Netherlands. Those sorts of opportunities broaden horizons and contribute to growth. One of the cruellest and most short-sighted decisions by the previous Government was pulling us out of the Erasmus programme. In Wales, the Liberal Democrats stepped up to reverse the damage. Former Education Minister Kirsty Williams introduced the Taith exchange programme that, unlike its English counterpart, has been praised for ensuring accessibility for students from less privileged backgrounds.

Ultimately, the Liberal Democrats want to see the UK back at the heart of Europe, which would mean rejoining Erasmus, tearing down trade barriers and signing a youth mobility scheme with our EU counterparts—something the Labour Government have so far refused to do. The arc of human progress should ensure that older generations pass on more opportunities to younger generations than they have themselves enjoyed. We are living in a time when that arc of progress has gone into reverse, and us pro-Europeans must now win the argument for a stronger EU with Great Britain at its heart.

I was concerned to hear the word “pragmatic” used several times in this debate, because it sounds like pragmatic reasons are being given as excuses for not making more progress in rebuilding our relationship with the EU. We should be concerned by talk about pragmatism and arguments made solely in rational language, because those arguments failed miserably in 2016, when arguments were built as to why we should stay in the European Union based solely on rational economic language.

The EU is a pragmatic project, but at its core it is also an idealistic one. It is a project grounded in ideals, and in the idea that the nations of central Europe should never go to war again. It succeeded in that mission, making it one of the most successful political projects ever in mankind’s history. When we are making the argument for rejoining the European Union, let us use the language of idealism, not just rationalism. Unless we build a case for the UK to rejoin the EU based on idealist language and get people to buy into the ideals on which the European Union was founded, we will not have long-term buy-in to the project among the people we need to convince.

6.10 pm

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John.

I am afraid my contribution will jar with the cosy consensus of the debate, if we should call it a debate, because has it not just been an echo chamber for the laments of two or three dozen Europhile MPs? It has not been a debate at all, but what brings us here are 130,000-odd signatures on a petition. Well, of course, what that immediately calls to mind is the contrast with the 17,410,742 British voters who made the most consequential decision in the greatest democratic decision ever made by the greatest number of people ever voting. That embarrasses them. That is why, almost two hours into this debate, this is the first time we have heard that figure, because those in this Chamber have their face set against that democratic decision.

This petition is notable in its arrogance. It does not even say, “Well, let’s have another referendum.” No—in its arrogance, it demands that we simply rejoin the EU, which the British people decided democratically to leave. I know that is an uncomfortable fact, but that is the core issue.

Seamus Logan: The hon. and learned Gentleman speaks of uncomfortable facts. Has he been listening to the uncomfortable facts that have been shared in this debate?

Jim Allister: Let me give the hon. Member and others some rather uncomfortable facts. I am delighted to tell those Euro-fanatics who gather in this hallowed hall today that only 50 of my constituents in North Antrim signed this petition. Of course that is for very good reason, because unlike the rest of you, we have continued to have to live under the EU. We have continued to be subject to the bureaucratic stranglehold of the EU single market and its customs code. What has that meant? It has meant that in over 300 areas of law we in Northern Ireland are governed by laws that we do not make and cannot change because they are made by a foreign Parliament in which we have no say. That is the product of the denial of Brexit to the people of Northern Ireland. That is how we have been left. Those are the laws that govern the single market.

I hear the moving desire of hon. Members to be back in the single market, but let me tell them what that has meant for Northern Ireland: we were told that it was the best of both worlds and a panacea, and if only we all had the best of both worlds. Well, having the best of both worlds and being able to sell into the mighty market of the EU was supposed to bring a flood of foreign direct investment into Northern Ireland. According to some enthusiasts, we were going to be the Singapore of the west, but the reality is that there has not been one foreign direct investment in Northern Ireland because of single market access.

Before people get what they wish for, I caution them that being in the single market is no panacea. As I have already illustrated, in Northern Ireland it comes at the price of being governed by laws that we do not make and cannot change. Everyone here seems to want to put the whole United Kingdom in that position. I have heard hon. Members lament American tariffs, but they want to put themselves in the club that will be most tariffed by the United States. Where is the logic in that? It really is beyond belief.

The real lesson from Northern Ireland is that the growth in our economy has come in the services sector, which is the sector that is outside EU control. Of the two sectors—manufacturing and services—the sector that has grown is the one outside EU control. The one that is still under the EU's control is the one that has struggled and has not grown. That is a telling reminder of what it means for people to subjugate themselves in a subservient way to rules made in a foreign Parliament.

Ms Creasy: The hon. and learned Member is right that many of us feel desperately sad about the position that Northern Ireland was put in as a result of Brexit. However, I hate to tell him that because of the value of the Good Friday agreement, the services sector is included in the Northern Ireland protocol.

The hon. and learned Gentleman made much stir of the 50 people from his constituency who deigned to sign the petition, dismissing those who might be supportive of having a relationship with the European Union. What does he say to the 693,525 voters in Northern Ireland—the majority of voters in Northern Ireland—who voted to remain? There are many issues of contention thrown around in this debate, but if he wants to talk numbers, those numbers matter.

Jim Allister: Two things: the hon. Member is wrong that services fall under the Northern Ireland protocol and the Windsor framework. They are not. They are free from it, so she is simply wrong about that. On the question of Northern Ireland voting in favour of remaining, so what? [*Laughter.*] That was not the question on the ballot paper. The question on the ballot paper was:

“Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?”

As Members titter and congratulate each other, they might as well say, “Well didn’t London vote to remain?” So what? It was a national vote; it was not about how the regions voted, because the question on my ballot paper, as on yours Sir John, was did I want the United Kingdom to leave or to stay—that was the question. My only regret is that in my part of the United Kingdom, we were not delivered the Brexit that was voted for.

6.19 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I congratulate all the petitioners on securing this important debate. More than 400 signatures came from my constituents alone, and I believe it is democratic to debate these important issues. Today is the start of a very important debate, and I hope the Government will listen.

I say to the petitioners that I fought to the last to stop Brexit. I was shocked and grieving when we left in January 2020, and I almost took it as a personal failure that we could not stop Brexit. I would be the first to agree that Brexit is not working, and we have heard why this afternoon.

Like my wonderful friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Manuela Perteghella), I am a European product. I would not be here without the EU. I am German by birth and origin. I met and married my British husband, and I became a British citizen when I was 30. For the last 35 years, I have tried to get rid of my German accent.

Through those many years, I have always been a European at heart. That heart was somewhat taken out of me, but through my scars, incomprehension and shock, I have come to understand that looking back is not an option now. We must find new ways of engagement and a new language to define our relationship with the European Union. We have to be pragmatic, realistic and honest with our constituents. I expect our Government not to look backwards, but to define what a reset of our relationship will lead to. The Liberal Democrats believe that the end of that journey should be being at the heart of the European Union once more.

Last week, I was in Brussels as a member of the Parliamentary Partnership Assembly, as were a number of colleagues here today. The Assembly is the only formal body in which UK parliamentarians engage with EU parliamentarians. I heard from our European friends that the TCA is the EU's most comprehensive and wide-ranging trade agreement with any third country, which is because the UK is an ex-member. No other country has left the European Union; most want to accede.

It is important to recognise that the EU is quite happy with the TCA, and it does not necessarily want to reopen those discussions. We can theorise and test how far the TCA can go, but we have to recognise that the EU is currently quite happy with it. However, the EU does want to engage on its concerns about people-to-people contact, a sustainable energy future, and security and resilience.

On people-to-people contact, the EU has mainly been proposing a youth mobility scheme. We Liberal Democrats were first out of the box to say we should agree to that. It is not helpful if the Government say that a youth mobility scheme is a return to free movement—it is not. We have to consider what a youth mobility scheme could realistically look like.

Although I tried in the last Parliament to look at whether we could go back to something like Erasmus+, I recognise that it would cost the Government a lot of money, so I cannot see it happening just now. The Turing scheme, which is not just about students but apprenticeships and other exchanges for young people, is accessible only to British citizens. We should therefore consider whether there is an opportunity to make Turing reciprocal. I urge the Government at least to look at that, because it would make some sort of movement towards the European Union.

Secondly, energy security is a shared concern, and the European Union wants to engage on energy security. However, the current system through which we trade our energy is not working. It was set up as part of the TCA, it is called something very complicated—multi-region loose volume coupling—and it has to be replaced by something a lot more ambitious than the current price coupling model.

That is particularly important if we want to draw in the vital private investment to realise the huge potential of the North sea for our shared clean power plan. Again, I urge the Government at least to look at how we are trading our energy. This would have big advantages not only for UK citizens but for EU citizens, and the EU is open to having such discussions.

[*Wera Hobhouse*]

Another issue is, of course, the emissions trading scheme. Again, I do not expect the Government ultimately to follow a European model entirely, but we need to align as far as possible.

Finally, it is obviously in our shared interest to protect and defend Europe. When we were talking about security co-operation, someone from the European side said, “Oh, we have to look at whether this needs a new legal framework.” I would say in response, “If the European Union is talking about new legal frameworks, that is probably not the pragmatic and realistic solution we are looking for.”

However, I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) that unless we find ways to improve security procurement and to work together on the supply chains to ensure that our defence systems work together, including by determining where we produce things, the reset of our relationship will be just warm words.

I urge the Government to move away from warm words—at the PPA, we all exchanged warm words about our new relationship—towards action and results. Otherwise, we will be talking about a reset for many decades. We need action from the Government now.

6.26 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John.

I have listened very carefully to all the speeches today. Some were fine; some were perhaps not so fine. And I have to say that I am not entirely sure where we are. I do not know what to make of this debate. I am really confused, and I hope the winding-up speeches will help me to get a better understanding of where the House is.

I say that because I heard Labour say throughout last year’s general election campaign that the only important thing are the red lines. It was all about not joining the single market or the customs union, and that was about it. As the months passed, we started to hear about this reset, and I thought, “Okay, let’s examine this. What does it mean? What are we going to get from this reset?” We have found that it is not very much. For this Government, a “reset” is the EU doing this Government some sort of favour to mitigate some of the impacts of Brexit without the Government giving anything back in return.

People have raised the issues of touring musicians and the youth mobility scheme, with both of which I am particularly associated. I do not know if I have mentioned it before, but I was a rock musician back in the day and toured Europe extensively. These two issues are related, because a negotiation started to happen within the EU. There was a sense that, in return for offering a youth mobility scheme to Europe, we would secure the rights for our artists to tour freely within the European Union once again, and that some sort of creative passport and visa would be given to our bands so they could once again have the pleasure of playing within the European Union. However, that was rejected out of hand. The Government were not interested, and these are their last words when it comes to a youth mobility scheme:

“We do not have plans for a youth mobility agreement.”

I say to Labour Members and colleagues in the Chamber today that I am encouraged by their enthusiasm for the European Union. I take heart from the fact they are starting to talk again about the single market and the customs union. And I say sincerely to them, “Go for it! Please, go for it! You’re our only hope.”

Dr Arthur: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. He suggests that we “go for it” on the customs union, but I think he was one of the MPs who abstained when he had that chance. Why the SNP abstained is a great mystery in Scottish politics. Can he explain why?

Pete Wishart: I cannot believe we are still debating that. What happened that day, and this is my final word on the issue—the hon. Gentleman was not there, but I was—is that the vote was on a customs union, not the customs union. That proposition was unacceptable to us and other colleagues across the House.

Now I have dealt with that myth, and now it is out of the way, let us get back to the beginning. That was a disappointing intervention, because I am actually praising Labour Members. I am saying that there is hope at last for those of us who want to return to the European Union, and that is great.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman knows to speak through the Chair. He is just about getting away with it. That was a good exchange, but let us continue.

Pete Wishart: I remind Labour Members that the petition actually reads:

“Apply for the UK to join the European Union as a full member as soon as possible”.

There are two key parts to it: “as a full member” and “as soon as possible”. It does not ask for a positive and good reset, but for the UK to rejoin the EU. That is the sort of territory that we must start to get back into, and that will come only from Labour Members. They have such a huge majority that if they all come together and ensure that we have a collective voice on that point, it will make a difference.

I encourage Labour Members to pursue this issue and keep on taking it to their Government—to argue with passion and conviction that they want the UK to be back in the European Union. That is the only thing that will satisfy the petitioners, because that is what they want. As has been rightly said, the UK public are way ahead of the House on this issue; some 60% of them now want the UK to rejoin the European Union. We should look at what they want. If one of the parties—just one—were to say, “We are totally committed to full EU membership,” that would be immensely popular; it would go with the grain of public opinion throughout the United Kingdom.

I say to Labour Members that economic growth has been pretty hard to find; they have not been able to do much in the past few months, and we have another reset coming up on Wednesday. When it comes to the economic conditions of this country, addressing Brexit and rejoining the single market would unlock massive investment for the United Kingdom and get us back on our feet again—that is where economic growth could come from. Labour Members have to look at this issue as a way to address some of the economic difficulties that they find themselves in.

I am encouraged that we now have group of Labour Members of Parliament who are sincere in their desire to rejoin the European Union. That does not have to happen tomorrow or next year, but the Government have to say today that it is their intention to rejoin the European Union as a full member. That is what the petitioners are asking for, and, if I have it correctly, they want it to happen as soon as possible.

6.32 pm

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I congratulate Robert McMaster on creating this petition and I thank the 330 residents of my constituency who signed it—putting us in the top 5% in the country.

Five years ago, I gave my final speech in the European Parliament as leader of the Liberal Democrat group of MEPs. In that speech, I described Brexit as “a backward step” and as

“a vanity project that has no basis in reality.”

The fact that none of the four current Reform Members or any Conservatives—apart from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Fylde (Mr Snowden), who is bravely sitting on his own—is here in the Chamber to defend Brexit speaks volumes.

Leaving the European Union was a significant moment. We left a union of nations that was established to promote peace on our continent, that had seen the dismantling of barriers between nations, and that had enabled trade and cultural ties to flourish. In terms of international co-operation, what the European Union has achieved is second to none in the world. I still believe that we are stronger together and that, as a small island nation, we played a much bigger part on the international stage as one of the key members of that union.

Nobody wants to revisit the division and toxicity of the Brexit debate, which dominated our national discourse for years. I understand the hesitation of the Government even to go there, but we must not forget that that debate was fuelled by misinformation and outright lies about what leaving the European Union would mean for the UK. Ultimately, it was a playground rivalry between two of our now former Prime Ministers that played out on the national stage, with one side never really believing that they would win and the other not preparing the ground for what would be a seismic shift in the way we do business and trade with our nearest neighbours.

I still believe that leaving the EU was one of the worst decisions that this country has made, and it is what brought me into politics. Having sat in this Parliament as a Member for almost exactly the same amount of time as I sat in the European Parliament, I can honestly say that the democratic deficit is not in Brussels. As an Opposition MP in this place, I believe I have less influence over decisions that will affect the people and the economy of my constituency than I did as a Member of the European Parliament. A Government elected by just one in three voters in this country have secured the biggest majority—aside from 1997—since the second world war, and yet they have chosen to set themselves red lines around our relationship with the European Union that continue to thwart growth, hamper economic development and curtail the opportunities of our young people, all of which are unnecessary and deeply damaging to the standing and prosperity of the UK.

There is a fundamental misunderstanding—possibly, a wilful ignorance—by those in Government as to what the British public really want now. I will use the example of Brixham in my constituency. Brixham is one of the major fishing ports in the UK, a place where the community believed the lies that they were told about what Brexit would mean for the fishing industry. When campaigning in Brixham over the past couple of years, I lost count of the number of people who told me that they had been lied to and who felt cheated by Brexit. People who would never have wanted to elect a Liberal Democrat wore the yellow T-shirt with the “Stop Brexit” slogan back in 2019, and they went out to vote for me last year, because they are so angry at what they see as a betrayal of their trust.

Dr Arthur: I cannot resist—did the hon. Member say that people were so angry they voted Lib Dem?

Caroline Voaden: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. People vote Lib Dem for lots of reasons—but maybe they do not think that we will betray them in the same way that the Conservatives did.

Only last week, with many colleagues, I returned to the European Parliament as part of the Parliamentary Partnership Assembly. While there, I heard the Minister for the Cabinet Office, the right hon. Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), refer to research by Aston University that showed that exports to the European Union have fallen by 27% since Brexit. For a Government who want growth, that figure alone should be enough to change their attitude.

That figure is no surprise, however, to anyone who talks to some of the businesses in my constituency. One shellfish exporter tells me that they have to have 17 pieces of paper signed by a vet for every consignment of mussels they export to the EU, making it impossible to trade efficiently with their biggest customer and hampering growth in their business. A small household product retailer has had to end trade with all EU customers because of the new GPSR—general product safety regulation. Delicatessens struggle to cope with the red tape involved in importing smaller shipments of wine and food for the UK, which is the kind of regulations that only big suppliers are able to manage—I am sure that is repeated right across the country. A precision engineering company’s exports have also been badly affected by Brexit red tape—on and on it goes.

Apart from the impact on trade, the opportunities for our young people are being severely curtailed by Brexit. I will not revisit all the arguments that several Members have put forward in this debate, except to say that it is a tragedy that our children and grandchildren will not have the chances that we had—that so many of us had—to go to Europe to develop skills, including cultural understanding and language skills, and to bring all that experience back to the UK. It is high time that the Government agreed a youth mobility scheme with the EU. Last week, I welcomed the PPA agreement that said that the Government understood the need to establish a youth opportunity scheme, including apprenticeships. We all understand the need; let us hope that the Government will go further than that and address it.

Our country has been impoverished by Brexit in so many ways—economically, culturally and politically. I am sure that I am not the only one to be absolutely

[*Caroline Voaden*]

demoralised by the millions of hours of negotiations that took us out of the European Union, and now, potentially, the millions more that will go into negotiating the piecemeal, bit-by-bit replacements for all the benefits that we lost.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): My hon. Friend is being very generous with her time. On that point about the many hours taken to renegotiate and change the deal to get potential customs union access, we are now hearing talk from the Government about cutting waste in Whitehall. The irony is that the additional burden put on civil servants in Whitehall due to Brexit is now being spoken about as something that we need to get rid of. Does she have a suggestion for something the Government could do in relation to the European Union to reduce the workload for civil servants?

Caroline Voaden: If it were that easy, I am sure the Government would get rid of all that red tape at the stroke of a pen. Sadly, I do not think it is that straightforward.

It is not just about the hours that were wasted in those negotiations; the cost of all those civil servants' time is unimaginable. I appreciate the scars borne by Members who served through those years, as referenced by the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy), but I do not agree that we should not revisit our intentions, given the clear evidence that we now have of the disaster that Brexit has been.

The Conservative Government wrecked the UK's relationship with Europe. The current Labour Government say that they want a reset, but no one I spoke to in Brussels last week was clear what that really means. Fixing our broken relationship with Europe is the most obvious way to boost our economy, providing much-needed funding to fix our public services. The single biggest thing we can do to turbocharge our economy in the medium and long term is form a customs union with the EU, tearing down the trade barriers and shredding the red tape that is holding us back. We must also fix our trading relationship to protect Britain from Trump's trade war.

The Liberal Democrats have always believed that we are stronger as part of Europe. It is a long road back and, thanks to the Conservatives, it will take a long time to rebuild trust, but we owe it to future generations to make it happen. Sadly, it is probably too early to campaign to rejoin the EU right now—it is not even an option on the table—but we must take concrete steps towards it, rather than just repeating meaningless warm words, and start rebuilding the shattered relationship. To answer the petitioner's question of whether the UK should rejoin the EU, I will go out on a limb and say that yes, I believe we should.

6.42 pm

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I thank the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) for introducing the debate, and Robert and others for originating the petition.

Brexit is an issue that continues to shape the future of our economy. Way back in 2016, promises were made that our departure would lead to a stronger, more prosperous

economy—promises from the likes of Boris Johnson, Jacob Rees-Mogg and the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage). However, today we stand here confronting the harsh reality that those promises have not been fulfilled. Instead, costs have gone up and supply chains are disrupted.

Research from the London School of Economics concludes that leaving the EU reduced the value of our goods exports by an estimated £27 billion in 2022—a sum so large that it would plug the black hole created by the Conservatives' mismanagement of the economy and leave enough to build two and a half new Royal Berkshire hospitals on the edge of my constituency. The same study estimated that 14% of firms that previously exported to the EU have now stopped.

I know of one company that used to export over £0.5 million-worth of product to the EU, but the business with the EU stopped straight after Brexit. Recently, the owner told me that after several years they had got the business back. That was seemingly good news, but when I asked them what the profit margin was, they said, "Absolutely shot away"—nothing like it was before. That is one of the damaging effects of Brexit, and those are the losses felt by real people in our communities. Small businesses have been left to suffer most from the Conservatives' legacy of creating trade barriers that are so expensive to overcome.

Tim Roca: The hon. Member talks about ridiculous trade barriers, which we have heard a lot about today. I and other members of the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs were in Dover to see the preparations that the previous Government had made on trade barriers, particularly in relation to agricultural products coming into the UK, and were shocked to discover a £20 million facility in Bastion Point that was built but will never be used. Does that not exemplify Tory incompetence?

Clive Jones: It certainly does. They certainly know how to easily waste £20 million. They showed us that they were very good at doing that.

Shockingly, it is estimated that from 2021 up to the end of 2023, nearly 2 billion additional pieces of paper had to be filled out by British exporters as a result of our leaving the EU. They range from export declarations to transit declarations, origin certificates and other documents with obscure acronyms. It is a Gordian knot of red tape. It is a figure so large that if all 2 billion pieces of paper were put end to end, they could wrap around the circumference of the Earth 14.7 times, or reach the moon and come halfway back again. When the Government said that Brexit would be a stellar success, that was not what I thought they had in mind.

Marks and Spencer recently hit out against the Brexit bureaucracy that plagues our economy. I want to share some of its examples because they perfectly illustrate the day-to-day impact of the current Brexit deal in constraining our economy's ability to grow. Before Brexit, lorries full of produce going from Scotland to the Republic of Ireland would need just one piece of paper listing what was in the trailer before setting off. Now, its trucks are armed with more than 200 pieces of paper, which take hours to complete and require niche details such as the Latin name for the chicken used in its tikka masalas. About 7,000 different Marks and Spencer

products destined for Irish customers require export health certificates, and each certificate requires a vet to sign it off, costing Marks and Spencer more than £1 million a year. Exporting to the EU has become a nightmare, even for bigger companies, because of unnecessary administration and physical checks.

Sean Woodcock: Will the hon. Member give way?

Clive Jones: I will.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): Order. I advise the hon. Member that I would like him to wind up his speech in a few moments so that I can get the other speakers in, so it would probably be better if he did not take another intervention. Forgive me, but I want to give these other people a chance.

Clive Jones: I will be very quick, Sir John.

The Prime Minister and others have started resetting the relationship with Europe. That cannot be easy because trust has been lost on the part of European leaders—it has completely disappeared. But we have to ask the Minister this: when can we expect tangible changes to be made to the trading relationship between the UK and the EU? Does the Minister recognise the difficulties that 2 billion pieces of paperwork present for our country's businesses, and that that is massively constraining our ability to grow?

6.49 pm

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John.

This issue is close to the hearts of many of my constituents in Wimbledon and a key reason why I have the honour and privilege of representing them in Parliament today. We all know—well, almost all of us know—that the Tories' botched Brexit deal has been a disaster for our country. They should hang their heads in shame, as should the previous leader of the Labour party, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), who, among various failings, whipped his party to vote in favour of triggering article 50, firing the starting pistol on our leaving the EU, without any thought as to what form that exit might take. Nor should we forget the role of the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) and his band of bickering Reform buddies, who, along with Trump and Putin, long advocated this hugely damaging, deeply unpatriotic act of self-harm. They tore up Churchill's roadmap that sought to place the UK at the heart of Europe, at the behest of their idols in the Kremlin and now the White House.

The signatories of the petition are right to point out that Brexit has failed to deliver any tangible benefits. All it has done is burden businesses with red tape, restrict opportunities for young people and weaken our economy. This debate, however, should not be about the past; it should be about the future. How do we now get out of the mess caused by the mendacity of Reform, the opportunism of the Conservative party, the dogma of the Northern Ireland Unionists, and the weakness of the previous Labour leadership? If the Government are serious about growing the economy and Britain regaining its global economic, cultural and political prominence, they must begin by meaningfully re-engaging with Europe.

The EU is still our closest trading partner, accounting for 42% of our exports in 2023, yet the Conservative Brexit deal erected unnecessary trade barriers, creating expensive red tape that is holding back British firms, especially small businesses, costing our economy millions in lost exports. Although the current Government talk big on growth, they are failing to deliver. As I said in the Chamber last November, the Chancellor's so-called Budget for growth did not do what it said on the tin, but kicked that very can down the road—perhaps, I should have said into the gutter. Closer ties with the EU is the fastest way to kickstart growth.

While the Government continue to tie themselves up with various red lines, they leave themselves with precious little room to negotiate. A youth mobility scheme with the EU would be a crucial first step forward. It is ludicrous that the Government refuse to consider it. The current arrangement is not only harming our economy, but denying our young people life-enhancing experiences. Furthermore, we need to join the Erasmus scheme. The UK's exit from the programme has deprived students of valuable opportunities to study, learn and live in Europe, preventing young people from experiencing the cultural and professional benefits of living and working not just in EU states, but the many non-EU countries in the scheme.

We need to start talking to the EU about joining the PEM and then the customs union, as that would cut much of the red tape currently hampering our exporters. Doing so would remove unnecessary barriers, boost exports and lower the cost of imports, providing much-needed relief to businesses and consumers alike. Admittedly, joining the customs union would preclude us signing trade deals of our own, but given the experience thus far—the disadvantageous one struck with Australia and New Zealand—that would be no bad thing, especially with Trump now raising the prospect of us agreeing one with the US, which on all the evidence thus far, would doubtless benefit him far more than us.

The cultural impact of Brexit has been equally damaging to the UK. Britain is a global cultural leader, and our actors, artists and musicians are renowned worldwide, but Brexit has made it significantly harder for them to tour Europe due to expensive visas and excessive paperwork. The Lib Dems would push for cost-free, paper-free, short-term travel for UK artists and their support staff. We must also rejoin the EU's Creative Europe programme to ensure that British culture continues to thrive on the international stage.

As I have outlined, if we want to restore Britain's place in the world, we must meaningfully re-engage with Europe. I do not, however, advocate rejoining the EU overnight. The damage caused by Brexit is not only economic but social. We all remember the friction it caused within families and communities, and between the regions and countries of the UK. We must eventually rejoin the EU, but we can only do so by bringing the country—not just a wafer-thin majority—with us. Any party that won an election on a mandate to rejoin the EU would walk into the subsequent negotiations naked, with no means of avoiding a hard deal. Admittedly, it is highly unlikely that we will ever be able to rejoin on the favourable terms we once had and have now forsaken, but it is critical that we negotiate from a position of strength, as Tony Blair has advocated, and do not go into any talks with a begging bowl merely asking to rejoin.

[Mr Paul Kohler]

That is why the Lib Dems have set out a clear, pragmatic roadmap to rebuilding our ties with the EU: first, by rejoining European agencies and programmes, then by negotiating a customs union, and then by joining the single market. Those steps will help to restore Britain's prosperity, repair the damage caused by Brexit and bring back some of the opportunities we have lost.

The message from the petition is clear: the British people want a better future. They see the failure of Brexit and understand that our country's prosperity, security and influence depended on closer ties with Europe. The Conservative Government wrecked our relationship with the EU and the new Labour Government refuse to take the necessary steps to repair it.

The Government must do what is right for the British public and not just run scared of the hon. Member for Clacton and the rest of his quarrelsome rag-bag of little Englanders and cheerleaders for Trump and Putin. We are part of Europe, and I have no doubt that one day we will rejoin the EU and regain our position at its heart, just as Winston Churchill advocated. Until that day, we must work tirelessly towards fostering ever closer co-operation by breaking free of the red lines in which this Government have bound themselves so unnecessarily.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): I call Brian Mathew. You have four minutes.

6.55 pm

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I thank the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) for introducing this valuable and vital debate. I also thank the 260-odd constituents of mine who signed the petition, including many musicians and people who work in the music industry at Real World Studios in Box.

Members have spoken eloquently about our need to take steps to rejoin the EU. Ironically, what is happening on the other side of the Atlantic may be driving the desire for that even faster. With Trump in the White House, it is even more vital that we re-establish our relationship with our European friends.

Hon. Members have mentioned security, and not only in a military sense. Cuts to the United States Agency for International Development have imperilled the World Health Organisation's early warning system for identifying and taking action on dangerous diseases. A month ago, there was an outbreak of the Marburg virus in Tanzania, a week ago there was a Lassa fever case here in London, and there could easily be an outbreak of Ebola at any time.

Covid has taught us that we live in a small world, and the early warning system is now gone. The EU has the power to replace USAID, and by rejoining the EU we could help direct it towards those and other dangers. In a dangerous world, we must reconnect with our European friends and allies. That would be good for us, for Europe and for the world. For our security, economy and health, let us rejoin the EU.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): Much appreciated. Jim Shannon, you have two minutes.

6.57 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I will talk even faster than I normally do. It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John.

It is no secret that I am a Brexiteer. I voted to leave, and so did my constituency of Strangford—55% to 45%. The logic of some of the democrats in here is that Scotland voted to stay, Wales had its vote, England had its and Northern Ireland had its. But the vote was all of us taking a decision together. Whether we like democracy or not, that is the way it is.

I have been a politician for a great many years. I canvassed people and tried to encourage them to vote against the Belfast agreement. I fundamentally disagreed with allowing prisoners out of jail, with the disbanding of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and with the cloud that settled over the Ulster Defence Regiment. I absolutely opposed all those things with every sinew of my body, but I accepted the will of the people. The people said that is what they wanted, and I went ahead with that. I have worked within an institution that is fundamentally flawed, and the outworking of the concessions contained within a simple yes or no referendum has had lasting results. Fishing is vital to my constituency, and I hope the changes that the Government sought will benefit us in terms of quotas, jobs and opportunities.

I question the benefits of rejoining the EU. I could highlight the vile and repugnant way that the EU has used many constituents to hurt the UK for daring to leave. I could talk about the lack of seeds, packages of medication, chocolate biscuits and sausages, and the damage to our microbusinesses from EU regulations. I could talk about the fact that Northern Ireland is precluded from state aid, and the fact that we have restrictions but no representation. I could argue with anyone that the EU's treatment of Northern Ireland as a whole indicates its rotten nature, but none of that really matters. I urge the Minister and the Labour Government not to give up our fishing rights. The UK voted to take them back, and the Government must respect and adhere to that.

I will conclude with this, ever mindful of what you told me, Sir John. The will of the people is all that matters, and they have spoken. Without another referendum, there can be no return, and in my opinion there should be no return. We are all democrats, elected through the democratic system, and we must keep that in mind. Democracy may not be palatable at times, but it has to be respected at all times. That is a full stop in any debate on this issue.

7 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I begin by thanking the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) for opening this excellent debate. I also extend my thanks to Mr McMaster for initiating the petition, as well as the 130,000 members of the public who signed it. Their desire for the UK to be once again at the heart of Europe has today brought together Members from across the House.

We can see from the number of Liberal Democrat contributions that this subject is very important to our party. My hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) talked about the impact on defence,

and my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Manuela Perteghella) talked about higher education. My hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (James MacCleary) spoke about youth mobility and the Pan-Euro-Mediterranean convention, while my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick) talked about the impact on farmers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) gave a very personal reflection on her own journey, for which I am grateful, and my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) talked about fishing. My hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones) spoke eloquently about barriers to trade. My hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) gave a polemic, which I really enjoyed, and my hon. Friend the Member for Melksham and Devizes (Brian Mathew) made a particularly interesting contribution about health co-operation, for which I thank him.

There were many contributions from Members representing other parties, and I particularly want to thank the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy) for her striking speech and metaphors. I have to say that a night out in Walthamstow sounds somewhat messier than a night out in Richmond, but I am very grateful for her contribution. Members from other parties mentioned impacts on tourism, particularly touring musicians, language schools and international aid, and the hon. Member for Banbury (Sean Woodcock) had some very interesting things to say about supply chains.

It would have been lovely to have heard from members of the Tory party, although we look forward to the speech from the hon. Member for Fylde (Mr Snowden). It seems extraordinary that despite how much time this issue has taken up in the Chamber and across the country over so many years, not a single member of the Conservative party—apart from the poor hon. Member for Fylde, who was not even a Member at the time—is here to defend what it did while in government.

The Liberal Democrats are proud to be the country's most pro-European party, and we have been vocal in our support for the Government's warm words on a reset and a rebuilding of our relationship with Europe after the disaster of the botched Brexit deal under the last Conservative Government. We are, however, concerned that those warm words are not leading to action. The wholly inadequate deal with the EU that was negotiated by the previous Government has done enormous damage to British businesses. There have been soaring export costs, increased workforce shortages and reams of red tape creating huge barriers to growth.

Having spent the past five years grappling with the bureaucracy of Brexit and increased trading costs, many business owners across the country will now be deeply concerned by the additional challenges to businesses that are coming from Washington. The returning Trump Administration have fundamentally changed trading relations globally with the introduction of high tariffs, which we already have on steel and are being threatened in other areas, too. It is vital that the UK leads on the world stage again, standing up for our interests by working closely with other countries. Most importantly, we must work with our European neighbours, which is why I am so glad to be speaking alongside colleagues from all parties to advocate for a constructive rebuilding of our relationship with Europe.

The new global security and geopolitical landscape has shifted since the Brexit vote of 2016. With an aggressive Russia, an assertive China and the return of a Trump Administration in the US, the case for closer cross-channel ties with the EU is made far more urgently. The Government are rightly looking to build closer defence and security agreements with Europe, and I am glad that they have embarked on those vital negotiations.

However, recent reports suggest that despite our being part of the European “coalition of the willing”, UK arms companies will not be included in a new €150 billion commitment to an increase of defence capabilities, unless the Government agree to defence and security partnerships with Brussels. We know that European officials are insisting that those defence agreements come in tandem with other partnerships, including a youth mobility scheme, and I urge the Government to take the logical step of agreeing to such a scheme, which is a clear win-win for everyone.

As the Minister knows, the Liberal Democrats believe that a key and pragmatic step in our rebuilding is the introduction of a youth mobility scheme between the UK and the EU. Despite recent press reports that the Government plan to introduce such a scheme, and the encouraging words from the Prime Minister himself just last week in response to a question about that topic asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire), it has been deeply disappointing to hear the Home Secretary and other Ministers rule it out, despite knowing that an agreement on youth mobility would not lead to freedom of movement.

A youth mobility deal would be good for our economy, especially our tourism and hospitality sectors, and give young British people the opportunity to work and study abroad. It would be a win-win—and not just that, because it is what the British public want. Polling shows that two thirds of the UK population are in favour of a youth mobility scheme, and the scheduling of today's debate is further proof of the appetite across the country for closer ties with Europe. Introducing a youth mobility scheme between the EU and UK would send a clear message that this country is serious about supporting our young people and backing British business with the labour force that it needs to grow.

The EU is clear that it would welcome a youth mobility scheme. It has signalled that agreeing to such a scheme will be a necessary step before broader partnerships can be established, including on defence. I urge the Government to embark on negotiations so that we expand opportunities for young people across the country, and to acknowledge the broader benefits that the scheme would provide. Will the Minister agree that such a scheme would not cross any of the Government's red lines regarding a European reset?

More broadly, as the Minister will be aware, the previous Government accepted an agreement to allow EU member state nationals visiting the UK to benefit from a six-month visa waiver, although UK nationals are limited to 90-day visa waivers when visiting the Schengen area. That is a further example of the appalling deal that the Conservative Government secured. Has the Minister considered redressing this imbalance and securing a fair, reciprocal and inclusive mobility agreement with the EU that provides a six-month visa waiver in both directions?

[Sarah Olney]

The EU is our closest neighbour and largest trading partner. I sense that the Minister knows that we have to get on with repairing the trading relationship that was so badly damaged under the former Conservative Government. The botched Brexit deal has been a complete disaster for our country, especially for small businesses, which are held back by reams of red tape and new barriers to trade that cost our economy billions in lost exports.

The dismal picture of the financial impact of our withdrawal from the EU has become increasingly clear. A recent survey of 10,000 UK businesses found that 33.5% of currently trading enterprises experienced extra costs that were directly related to changes in export regulations due to the end of the EU transition period. Since 2019, global British goods exports have increased by just 0.3% a year, compared with an OECD average of 4.2%. Small business exports have suffered even more significantly, dropping by 30%, and 20,000 small firms have stopped all exports to the EU. A recent study found that goods exports had fallen by 6.4% since the trade deal came into force in 2021.

I urge the Government to acknowledge the damage that our current trading relationship with Europe continues to do, not just to individual businesses but to the economy as a whole, and to take the sensible step of negotiating a new UK-EU customs union to ease the pressure that so many businesses are under. In the past, the Minister talked of pragmatic negotiations. Surely it would be pragmatic to drop the Government's red lines and agree to a new UK-EU customs union. That would be the single biggest step that the Government could take to unlock growth. The Liberal Democrats will continue to call on the Government to do the right thing for our businesses.

The Government have made it clear that their No. 1 priority is economic growth, yet any proposal that might involve our European neighbours while contributing to boosting growth is dismissed. A new UK-EU customs union is a pragmatic and mutually beneficial proposal that would help the UK economy and labour market in the long term, stimulating the growth that the country so clearly needs.

The changes to the immigration system implemented in April 2024, which increased the minimum salary threshold for skilled worker visas, shrank the talent pool that hospitality businesses can recruit from and contributed to greater staff shortages in that sector. Around three quarters of the hospitality workforce is filled by UK citizens, but international talent has always been attracted to working in the UK because of our pedigree for hospitality and developing careers. In a 2024 survey of 1,650 employers from across a range of sectors, including hospitality, adult social care and manufacturing, 49% said that a reduction in the availability of migrant workers was one of the main causes of hard-to-fill vacancies.

The Government's decisions in the Budget added to the overall tax burden on hospitality businesses, many of which are considering whether they remain viable, so we must provide the tools that hospitality needs to help businesses to grow and to boost the wider economy, including access to global talent. I have heard from stakeholders in the hospitality sector, including business

owners and supply chain managers, who would welcome proposals that would bring the sector more stability, which would allow them to make longer-term plans within a more predictable and robust regulatory framework.

The Government have been clear on their red lines—no single market, customs union or free movement of people—but I am glad to have heard cross-party support for serious negotiations with our European neighbours. Liberal Democrats will continue to advocate for a fundamental reset of our relations with the EU. That means taking steps to fix the trading relationship, in line with our four-stage road map: first, resolving the low-hanging fruit, such as youth mobility; secondly, taking steps such as establishing a veterinary agreement and achieving mutual recognition of professional qualifications; and then establishing a UK-EU customs union, which would set us back on the path to the single market. In the longer term, our ambition remains that of seeing the UK at the heart of the EU once more.

Rebuilding our relationship with Europe is a fundamental part of making Britain more secure and prosperous. Given the threat of tariffs from the new Trump Administration, it has never been more important for our Government to break down the barriers to trade that were erected under the previous Conservative Government. By repairing our relationship with the EU, we will be able to deal with that unreliable and unpredictable actor in the White House from a position of strength. Does not the Minister agree that taking decisive steps, such as negotiating a new UK-EU customs union, establishing a youth mobility scheme and reducing red tape for high-street businesses, is the best way to achieve the growth that this Government are so focused on and that our country so desperately needs?

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): Before I call our final two speakers, may I thank colleagues for their brevity, particularly Clive, Paul and Brian—and Jim, whom I did not give much choice in the matter? That has allowed everyone to get in, and while I am in the Chair, I hope that I will ensure that everyone gets their chance to have their say.

Also, may I ask the Minister to leave Paul a couple of seconds at the end to say a final word? I also ask the shadow Minister please to leave the Minister plenty of time to respond to the debate.

7.11 pm

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir John.

I thank the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) for leading the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee, and I thank all other Members who contributed. Although we have heard some valuable and considered contributions, the debate has, at times, felt like a display of the patronising remainder echo chamber: “We know best,” “If only they had listened to all of our selectively picked stats,” and, “Brexiters didn't know what they were voting for.” Indeed, we heard sniggering when the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) set out in an intervention the kind of Brexit that he believed in.

Brexiters have been insulted, being compared with weirdos, or even those who assault other people on a night out—I thought that was a bit of a rich and testing comparison for a Labour Member to make, given the

party's own troubles on that front. Come on—this has even been blamed on Russia. Having listened to today's contributions, I do not think that many of the arch-remainer MPs have learned much about why they lost the referendum in the first place.

We can all remember where we were when we found out the result of the referendum. In my case, having delayed a mini-break with my wife to the Lake district so that I could spend 23 June 2016 campaigning for Vote Leave, I decided once we arrived at our hotel that it would test Mrs Snowden's generous patience and forgiveness if I spent the night and early hours watching the results come in. It was early the following morning when—to the annoyance of the other guests, I am sure—I woke up and shouted in jubilation as I found out we had voted to leave the European Union.

I accept that although that was a day of celebration for many, for others it was a day of disappointment and even anger. However, the verdict issued by the British public on that day was a final and binding decision, backed up with a confirmatory vote in 2019 when the Conservatives achieved a crystal-clear mandate to "Get Brexit Done".

James MacCleary: Will the hon. Member give way?

Mr Snowden: No, we are low on time.

Since 2020, we have seen the benefits of an independent Britain. The European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020 gave us freedoms over our borders, waters and money while offering the UK the chance to regulate and legislate in our own national interest. We are no longer bound by the free movement of people obligation that came with membership, which gives us a much stronger say over who can and cannot enter this country legally.

We departed the common fisheries policy, meaning that for the first time since 1973, we had sovereignty over our own waters. The Conservative Government used our new fiscal policy freedoms to cut VAT across a range of consumer products and to establish a number of freeports, stimulating growth in all the nations and regions of the UK.

Most obviously, our economic independence from the European Union has provided significant opportunity for tailored deals, helping to build British business and our wider economy. Under the last Conservative Government, 73 separate trade deals were secured alongside a deal with the EU. That will continue to happen only if we acknowledge and appreciate the strong democratic mandate we were given, and the opportunities we secured as a result, but it is starting to look like the current Government have little interest in promoting the successes of our independence and are unprepared to hold negotiations with the EU from a position of strength.

Just last week, the German ambassador told the British Chambers of Commerce that for Germany, at least, this Government's so-called reset with the EU is an opportunity for us to join the customs union. Will the Minister make it clear that that will not be a consideration in any future negotiations?

We know that Brussels is committed to demanding that the UK surrenders its new-found fishing rights and controls, leaving our waters at the mercy of French trawlers and our fishing industry at serious risk. I ask the Minister, very clearly: is that surrender on the table

or not? While she is here, can she confirm whether a youth mobility scheme is off the table? If it is, what has she been told by our European counterparts about their position? From what we know, the European Commission has made that a central demand. Today we have seen further reporting that the Government are set to cancel the single trade window. Will the Minister confirm that that will not lead to deeper EU-UK regulatory alignment in its place?

So far the Government have shown an inability to clarify and solidify their position on any of those issues and have been remarkably opaque about the form and content of discussions with EU counterparts. We Conservatives have been very clear and set out five tests that we hope the Government will take up to ensure that we protect our independence from the European Union and the successes, past and future, resulting from it. Will the Minister commit today that there will be no backsliding on free movement or compulsory asylum transfers; that the UK will not allow any new money to be paid to the EU; that there will be no reduction in our fishing rights; that there will be no new rule taking, dynamic alignment or European Court jurisdiction for the UK; and that there will be no compromise on the primacy of NATO as the cornerstone of European security? Those are our tests for acceptable engagement. If the Government remain within them, they will have our support.

The UK must pursue its own interests, working with our European partners but not captive to purely their interests. Ultimately, the Government must respect the will of the British public, who voted to leave the European Union.

7.17 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Ms Abena Oppong-Asare): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) for moving the motion; I am sure everyone will agree that he spoke very passionately. I will try to leave some time so that he can respond. I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to the debate on behalf of the Government, and I thank the Petitions Committee for its work representing constituents across the country and those who sign petitions.

I have been asked about this at various times in the debate, and I thought it would be better for me to be very clear from the outset, including with members of the public who signed the petition: this Government will not seek to rejoin the EU, nor will there be a return to freedom of movement, the customs union or the single market, as we set out in our general election manifesto. That was a clear commitment ahead of the election, in which the Government secured a significant majority. The manifesto was clear on the benefits of seeking a closer relationship with the EU, and since July the Government have been doing just that, led by the Prime Minister and the Minister for the Constitution and European Union Relations. That closer, more co-operative relationship with the EU is in the UK's national interest. The Government are working to increase security, safety and prosperity.

On security, we are responding to a once-in-a-generation moment for the collective security of our continent through our ambitious UK-EU security and defence relationship. On safety, we know that we must do what

[*Ms Abena Oppong-Asare*]

we can to strengthen our collective ability to tackle organised crime and criminality and work together on illegal migration, which is a challenge across the continent. On prosperity, to grow the economy and boost living standards we need to build export and investment opportunities for UK business and reduce barriers to trade with our biggest trading partners. All of that means that we need to be ruthlessly pragmatic in seeking a closer and more co-operative relationship with the EU.

I want to take this opportunity to reassure Members who raised concerns about the loss of data sharing, and about tackling matters such as cross-border crime. We have already increased the UK presence at Europol, and want to go further by including more co-ordination on real-time data sharing and arrest warrants. The Home Secretary was in Northern Ireland with her counterpart in recent weeks, showing the kind of joint working that we want to see more of.

I am grateful for the contributions to the debate by Welsh colleagues. Wales is a proud trading nation, which is why Welsh businesses will stand to benefit from the Government's efforts to tackle barriers to trade, not least through the SPS agreement. My hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy) has worked tirelessly on this issue; she is an esteemed campaigner, and she is right that this is not a quick process.

My hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) reminded us that someone was sadly killed during the EU referendum campaign. I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Jo Cox, who was a passionate campaigner on this issue.

A number of colleagues raised concerns about the impact that leaving the EU has had on businesses. We know that the global economic headwinds of recent years have not always been easy for businesses—I have heard evidence of that in this debate. That is why we want to tackle the barriers to trade for businesses. We know that facilitating business mobility is in our shared interest with the EU, as it supports trade and growth on both sides of the channel.

The Chancellor has made it clear that our biggest trading partner is the EU, with which our trade totalled over £800 billion in 2023. I reassure colleagues who have raised concerns about trade that the Government's No. 1 priority will be the growth of the UK economy, and free and open trade with our most economically important partners.

Pete Wishart: What the Minister has just said will come as a crushing blow to all the Europhiles in the Labour party that we have heard from—no ambition for the single market or the customs union—but will she at least suggest that she will possibly look at a youth mobility scheme?

Ms Oppong-Asare: I have made the position very clear. In the past the SNP has not voted for the customs union. We are following very clearly what people have asked us to do—our manifesto commitments.

On the Erasmus scheme, which was raised by the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) in particular, we are working with the higher education sector to ensure that our world-leading universities

continue to attract the brightest and the best and to support our economy, but I have to say to the right hon. Member that we have no plans to rejoin the Erasmus scheme.

Members raised concerns about opportunities for young people, and put forward proposals for a youth mobility scheme. The Government recognise the value of people-to-people connections, and of schemes that give young people the opportunity to experience different cultures and to work or study elsewhere. For example, the Turing scheme is the UK Government programme for students to study and work anywhere in the world.

Liz Saville Roberts: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Oppong-Asare: I would, but we are running out of time and I want to give my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley an opportunity to respond.

Since 2021, the Turing scheme has helped tens of thousands of UK students develop new skills, gain international experience and boost their employability, in the EU and beyond. Separately to Turing, the UK operates a number of bilateral youth mobility schemes, both with European countries such as Iceland, and with global partners such as India, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. We are also committed to resetting the relationship with the EU to improve British people's security, safety and prosperity. However, we do not have plans for a youth mobility agreement. We will of course listen to sensible proposals, but we have been clear that there will be no return to freedom of movement, the customs union or the single market.

We are looking to maximise the benefits of the EU relationship. It is a whole of Government commitment, which echoes what my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) said in urging the Government to think creatively. My right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), the Minister for the Constitution and European Union Relations, is leading that charge through regular engagement with his EU counterpart, Maroš Šefčovič, most recently at a meeting at the Parliamentary Partnership Assembly in Brussels on 17 March. The Foreign Secretary attended the EU Foreign Affairs Council, where he and EU high representatives for foreign affairs agreed to work towards a security partnership and committed to six-monthly foreign policy dialogues. The Chancellor also recently attended the Eurogroup, where she outlined that the reset in relations is about doing what is best in the interests of our shared economies.

That work is supported by much greater co-operation between the UK and the EU. Since we came into government, we have had over 70 direct engagements between UK Ministers and their EU counterparts. I hope that reassures Members that the relationship and the work that Ministers are doing with the EU is really strong and that we are very focused on strengthening that relationship in the best interests of this country. In May, we will welcome EU leaders to the UK for the first UK-EU summit, which we believe will provide an opportunity to make further progress on areas that will deliver benefits to British people, guided by our mutual benefit in finding collaborative solutions to our common problems.

This is not a zero-sum game; it is a win-win for both sides, with people across the UK and the EU benefiting. It is about turning the page, reforming alliances and

forging new relationships with our European friends. I want to be very clear that the Government will be open-minded and pragmatic about proposals that would improve British people's security, safety and prosperity, while keeping clear the red lines that we will not compromise on. In this time of change, the Government are stepping up to build alliances in a bid to make people safer and more prosperous. That is the core of our national interest.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): Thank you, Minister. I call Paul Davies to wind up the debate.

7.28 pm

Paul Davies: Most importantly, I again thank Robert for his petition, which initiated the high-quality debate that we have had—it has been quite remarkable. The other thing that stands out, which gives us hope for the future, is the tolerance that we have heard. We have heard

strong views from some people, and some consensus, but people have been able to express their views freely. It has been very different from what many of us experienced on the ground during the Brexit debate itself. Many of us were knocking doors at that time, and I think we can all remember some of that. This certainly gives us a good foundation to move the debate forward. It was a pleasure to meet Robert and his wife. I know they have had only a short visit, but I hope they have enjoyed it, and seeing their way around the palace. I am sure that Robert will continue to campaign for us to rejoin the EU.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 700005 relating to the UK joining the European Union.

7.29 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 24 March 2025

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Switzerland: Free Trade Agreement Negotiations

The Minister for Trade Policy and Economic Security (Mr Douglas Alexander): The sixth round of negotiations on an enhanced free trade agreement (FTA) with Switzerland took place in Switzerland between 3 and 10 March 2025.

Economic growth is our first mission in government and FTAs have an important role to play in achieving this. We are seeking an enhanced FTA with Switzerland that guarantees market access for UK services suppliers, facilitates the seamless flow of data and ideas between two world-leading services powerhouses, and provides long-term certainty on UK business travel to Switzerland. An enhanced FTA will contribute to growth and prosperity across the UK and build on our existing trading relationship with Switzerland. This currently supports 130,000 services jobs and more than £17 billion in services exports, including over £700 million from Scotland and the north-west.

Good progress was made in all negotiation sessions, including but not limited to digital trade, financial services, goods market access and dispute settlement. Productive discussions were held in relation to intellectual property, with further sessions scheduled later in the spring. Negotiators also provisionally closed two additional chapters.

Services, investment and digital

The UK Government's focus continues to be on agreeing ambitious outcomes in services, investment and digital trade which are not covered in the existing UK-Switzerland FTA. Good progress was made in financial services in particular, with both sides focused on agreeing the most comprehensive chapter that either country has signed.

On digital trade, provisions on data, source code and cryptography were discussed, with the UK continuing to seek ambitious outcomes.

Goods

Progress continued in talks around trade in goods, with discussions taking place on market access, focusing on securing outcomes that are commercially meaningful for UK exporters. The 99% of UK exports to Switzerland by value are already tariff free, with the bulk of remaining Swiss tariffs in the highly protected agriculture sector.

On customs and trade facilitation, the UK and Switzerland provisionally agreed a chapter on transparent, predictable and efficient customs procedures that help facilitate trade at the border. It includes commitments on the release of perishable goods that go further than Switzerland has agreed before in a trade agreement, and are in line with the UK's best precedents.

Both sides also agreed measures that promote the simplification of customs procedures and reduce administrative burdens for traders, including through digitisation and automation.

Good progress was also made on rules of origin, with commitments agreed to make it easier for UK firms to trade with Switzerland, while locking in our strong pre-existing rules of origin arrangements.

Transparency

Both sides reached agreement on a chapter that supports a transparent, stable and predictable environment for business. This includes commitments to promote transparency in Government decision making by ensuring regulations are accessible and encouraging public consultations when designing regulations.

Next steps

Round 7 of negotiations is expected to take place in the UK in summer 2025. The Government will continue to work towards delivering outcomes in the FTA that secure economic growth for the UK and will update Parliament on the progress of discussions with Switzerland as they continue to develop.

The Government will only ever sign a trade agreement that aligns with the UK's national interests, upholding our high standards across a range of sectors, alongside protections for the national health service.

[HCWS540]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Grassroots Sport: Facilities Investment

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): Grassroots sport clubs are at the heart of communities across the UK. As we deliver our plan for change, we will remove barriers to an active lifestyle and increase opportunity for all, ensuring that wherever people may live, they can access high-quality sports facilities and experience the joy that sport brings.

On Friday 21 March, the Government announced £100 million in additional funding for the UK-wide multi-sport grassroots facilities programme. Funding benefits a range of projects such as new and improved pitches, changing rooms, pavilions, solar panels, floodlights, goalposts and maintenance machinery, so that sites can provide a more inclusive and sustainable offer throughout the year. Our continued investment will mean that more community clubs and facilities can get people participating in the sports they love.

The programme delivers funding for local authorities, clubs and communities across the UK through our delivery partners: the Cymru Football Foundation in Wales, the FAs in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and the Football Foundation—a charity set up by the Government, the FA and the Premier League—in England.

Through this targeted investment, we will support grassroots facilities to provide priority use for women and girls, and increased access for under-represented groups, so that they can get on to the pitch, get active and develop a lifelong passion for a new sport. The 50% of investment will target the 30% most deprived areas, providing transformational funding to the areas that need it most. The 40% of funding will also support projects that have a multi-sport offer, meaning that more people can participate in a wider variety of sports

and activities that appeal to them. These facilities also often provide opportunities for boys and young men to participate and benefit from wider community facilities, such as mental health support, and the atmosphere of camaraderie that sport provides.

[HCWS544]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Great British Energy: Rooftop Solar Power

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Michael Shanks): Hundreds of schools, NHS trusts and communities across the UK will benefit from new rooftop solar power and renewable schemes to save money on their energy bills, thanks to a total £200 million investment partnership between Great British Energy and the UK Government, including the Department for Education and the Department for Health and Social Care.

In another step forward for the Government's plan for change, the Energy Secretary has today, Friday 21 March, announced the first major project for Great British Energy—a company owned by the British people, for the British people. It will immediately begin working with schools, the NHS and the devolved Governments to install rooftop solar panels, build local clean power and bring down energy bills.

In England, around £80 million in funding will support around 200 schools. This could lead to lifetime savings of up to £140 million. Estimates suggest that, on average, a typical school could save over £25,000 per year.

Additionally, £100 million will be allocated to nearly 200 NHS sites in England. This covers a third of NHS trusts. The NHS is the single biggest public sector energy user, with an estimated annual energy bill of £1.4 billion. This has more than doubled since 2019. Great British Energy's investment could save the NHS up to £260 million per year—up to £45,000 per hospital.

The first panels are expected to be installed by the end of summer 2025. This will save schools and hospitals money for the next academic year. There is also the potential to sell leftover energy back to the grid.

Schools and hospitals have been hit with rocketing energy bills in recent years, costing taxpayers millions of pounds and eating into school budgets. This has been driven by the UK's dependency on global fossil fuel markets. Great British Energy's first investment could see millions invested back into frontline services, targeting deprived areas, with lifetime savings for schools and the NHS of up to £400 million over around 30 years.

A further £9.3 million will power schemes in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. These projects can be a mixture of installations on public sector buildings, new community or local renewables projects, and other complementary technologies such as battery storage solutions. This funding has come from the budget allocated to GBE local delivery in the 2025-26 spending review, which has been apportioned between all four nations by population share. England has supplemented this with funding from existing budgets, including health and education. The devolved Governments may similarly

choose to use this new funding alongside existing budgets to deliver ambitious new projects or expand existing schemes.

In addition, local authorities and community energy groups will also be supported by nearly £12 million to help build local clean energy projects—from community-led onshore wind to solar on rooftops and hydropower in rivers—that can help drive growth.

Great British Energy's community energy fund will provide £5 million in grant funding to support community energy groups to develop their own clean power supply projects. These could generate profits that could then be reinvested into community projects or take money off people's bills.

The UK Government will continue to fund the local net zero hubs in England, with a total of £6.8 million for existing hubs. These offer a free-to-use service for local authorities to access the expertise and resource to get clean energy projects up and running.

Great British Energy is also launching partnerships with strategic mayoral authorities. The metro mayors can apply for a share of £10 million to deliver clean power projects in every region of England.

We have been clear from the start that expanding support for local and community power is a core ambition for Great British Energy. This announcement demonstrates an immense commitment by Great British Energy and the UK Government to support local and community energy now and in the future. These schemes will deliver clean, secure, home-grown power for our core public services and local communities.

[HCWS543]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

UK Pesticides National Action Plan

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): On 21 March the Government published the UK pesticides national action plan (NAP), setting out how we will reduce the environmental risk of pesticides by 10% over the next five years.

This plan—the first to be published in a decade—sets out a future of more sustainable pesticide use, which protects the environment and human health, and boosts food security for the long term.

The NAP sets out how all four UK Governments will support farmers, growers and other land managers to increase their use of sustainable farming practices to reduce the potential harm from pesticides by 10% by 2030, while controlling pests and pesticide resistance effectively.

Pesticide resistance, climate change and invasive species pose significant challenges to our food security. Embracing a future with a nature-friendly approach to pest management means a better deal for our food producers. Sustainable pesticide use supports healthier ecosystems in which vital pollinators, such as bees, are allowed to flourish, and crop health and food production are boosted for the long term.

This NAP will support voluntary moves by farmers towards more sustainable pest management through increased use of integrated pest management (IPM)—a sustainable and holistic approach to pest, weed and disease management, which can benefit farm businesses as well as the environment. By using nature-based solutions and alternative techniques, farmers can ensure that pesticide use is targeted and optimised, cutting down on input costs and tackling pesticide resistance to support long-term profitability and productivity.

The UK is a world leader in agrifood research and development. The actions in the NAP will build on this strong foundation and support continued growth in the sector, including by supporting manufacturers to bring more bio-pesticides to market and reducing barriers to innovation and precision application technology, such as drones.

Finally, the NAP outlines how we will ensure that regulations are followed by targeting enforcement efforts where they are needed most, through training, guidance and enhanced inspections and compliance.

The publication of the NAP follows wider Government action on pesticides. We have already committed to taking decisive action to protect bees and other pollinators by ending the use of three harmful neonicotinoids—clothianidin, imidacloprid and thiamethoxam—in England. The launch of the NAP presents another step in promoting the sustainable use of pesticides and protecting food security for the future.

The plan has been published by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the devolved Governments. The full UK pesticides national action plan can be found at:

www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-pesticides-national-action-plan-2025

[HCWS542]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Building Safety Levy

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): The Building Safety Act 2022 introduced a power for the Secretary of State to introduce a levy on new residential buildings requiring certain building control approvals in England, to raise revenue for the purpose of building safety expenditure. The Government have committed to ensuring buildings over 11 metres tall with unsafe cladding are fixed as quickly as possible, and to protecting the taxpayer and leaseholders from further remediation costs. The building safety levy, first announced in 2021, is one of the measures we are implementing to ensure that the industry responsible makes a fair contribution to fix building safety issues. It will be collected by local authorities on behalf of central Government.

As part of the “Remediation Acceleration Plan” published in December 2024, the Deputy Prime Minister announced her intention that the levy would come into effect in autumn 2025. To give the housing sector more time to adapt, we have determined that the levy regulations

will be laid in Parliament later this year, and the levy will now come into effect in autumn 2026. This will give local government, the Building Safety Regulator, and Registered Building Control approvers a further 12 months to prepare for the levy, and housing developers who will pay the levy more time to factor levy costs into their plans.

This will in no way impact the pace of remediation. The Government are committed to fixing building safety defects as quickly as possible.

In order to give housing developers as much time as possible to factor the cost of the levy into their plans for upcoming developments, I am today announcing the levy rates, that will be applied when the levy comes into force. These are included in the response to the levy technical consultation, which I am publishing today, having taken into account the feedback to this consultation and to the previous consultation on the levy. The technical consultation response provides further detail on the operation of the levy.

Levy rates have been set for each local authority area using average house prices for that area. Therefore, the levy rate is highest in those areas with the highest house prices, and lowest in those areas with the lowest house prices. This will help to mitigate the housing supply impact of the levy. A discounted rate of 50% of the standard levy rate has been set for works on previously developed land—sometimes known as “brownfield”—to reflect the higher cost of building on this type of land. Affordable housing and community facilities, and small developments with fewer than 10 units are exempt from paying the levy. The levy will be charged per square metre of floorspace in a chargeable development. The rates are therefore set per square metre.

[HCWS546]

Local Government Reorganisation

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): This Government was elected on a manifesto that pledged to fix the foundations of local government alongside a transfer of power and funding out of Westminster through devolution. That means creating clearer, more sustainable local government structures to unlock crucial efficiency savings, with more resources directed to the frontline. This reform will mean more accountable structures, making it much clearer for residents who they should look to on local issues, with fewer, but more empowered local political leaders, who can focus on delivering for residents. This Government will not waste this opportunity to achieve stability for local government across England and increase value for money for council taxpayers, so they are no longer paying an inefficient two-tier premium. I would like to update the House on progress on local government reorganisation.

Interim plans

Last month I invited all councils in two-tier areas and their small neighbouring unitary authorities to work together to develop proposals for reorganisation. I requested interim plans by Friday 21 March to contain updates on thinking in areas about their options for creating new unitary councils.

I recognise the challenges of producing these plans and I would like to thank members and officers in district, county and unitary councils for their hard work in preparing these documents. This demonstrates the commitment of colleagues across the local government sector to drive forward better outcomes for their citizens. We know that in many areas, local leaders have been working together on their plans for reorganisation for many years and are pleased to be invited to work with Government to seize this opportunity.

All district and county councils in two-tier areas and their neighbouring small unitaries were invited, and I am pleased to confirm that every single area—comprising councils of all political stripes—have responded to the invitation to reorganise, demonstrating without doubt the groundswell consensus from communities that change is overdue and needed. These areas are: Cambridgeshire and Peterborough; Derbyshire and Derby; Devon, Plymouth and Torbay; East Sussex and Brighton and Hove; Essex with Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock; Gloucestershire; Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Portsmouth and Southampton; Hertfordshire; Kent and Medway; Lancashire, Blackpool and Blackburn with Darwen; Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland; Lincolnshire, North Lincolnshire and North East Lincolnshire; Norfolk; Nottinghamshire and Nottingham; Oxfordshire; Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent; Suffolk; Surrey; Warwickshire; West Sussex; and Worcestershire.

Criteria for delivering new authorities

The Government have set out their criteria for these changes to provide confidence that new councils are right for individual areas. On the population size, the guidance is clear that new councils must be the right size to achieve efficiencies, improve capacity and withstand financial shocks. As set out in our “English Devolution” White Paper, we outlined a population size of 500,000 or more—this is a guiding principle, not a hard target—we understand that there should be flexibility, especially given our ambition to build out devolution alongside local government reorganisation.

The published guidance sets out that “there may be certain scenarios in which this 500,000 figure does not make sense for an area, including on devolution, and this rationale should be set out in a proposal.” In discussions with individual councils and parliamentarians, and in interviews given throughout the process, the Government have reinforced this position to aid local discussions. Equally, it may be decided that population sizes around this figure, or greater than it, are the best fit locally. Instead of presenting a top-down solution for each area, our starting point is to support and empower local leaders and to respect their knowledge, expertise and insight. This approach is in line with the new partnership between Government and local government.

There is a clear expectation that though councils will change, the communities they serve remain, along with the strong sense of history, identity and belonging which gives them the character local people hold dear. That matters, and it will not just be accepted, but celebrated for the pride of place it instils.

Support

Local government reorganisation is a complex process, and we are at the beginning of this journey. We will continue to reset the relationship and work in partnership

with the sector to ensure they receive the necessary support as we work together to deliver this ambitious agenda.

Councils need our full backing and support to drive these changes forward—and this Government are acutely aware of the difficult financial situation facing all councils following a decade of financial mismanagement by the previous Administration. I am pleased to announce that £7.6 million will be made available in the form of local government reorganisation proposal development contributions, to be split across these 21 areas. This is the first time that capacity funding has been made available for reorganisation proposals, recognising the priority that this Government attaches to this. Further information will be provided on how this will be allocated and we intend to make payments as soon as possible.

Beyond funding, we understand that practical support and learning from those who have undergone reorganisation before is crucial. My Department has been working closely with the LGA, trade unions and sector bodies to develop support for areas. The LGA Hub will host a central repository for practical advice and support. A programme of webinars and events will be available and the LGA and other sector bodies will be launching networks for peer support.

Next steps

The submission of interim plans is not a decision point. It is the next stage in the process and enables councils to engage with the Government on the issues that matter locally and receive support to develop their full proposals. We expect local leaders to continue working collaboratively and proactively with each other, including by sharing information.

In the coming weeks my officials will follow up with areas to discuss their interim plans, provide feedback and understand the collaboration and information sharing arrangements. The Department will be speaking to Surrey as a priority in the coming days, then with councils on the devolution priority programme during April, and other areas after the local government elections in May. For Surrey, the deadline for proposals is in May and for other areas later this year in September or November.

My Department will consider these proposals against the criteria set out before consulting and taking a decision on which of those proposals will be taken forward and implemented. This is a statutory process, and affirmative legislation will be needed to establish new councils and abolish any of the predecessor councils.

Conclusion

I acknowledge this is a significant undertaking—the largest structural reform of local government in half a century and a fundamental part of our project to reform the British state, so that it delivers for working people. We need to push forward together and deliver these changes, so communities can see the benefits of simpler structures and so councils can deliver better value for money public services. Local leaders are central to our mission to deliver change for hard-working people in every corner of the country through our plan for change, and our councils are doing everything they can to stay afloat and provide for their communities day in, day out. I will update the House after receiving full proposals and explain how they will be taken forward.

[HCWS545]

TRANSPORT

Road Maintenance

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander):

Today I am announcing two key measures to boost funding for transport as part of the Government's commitment to renew national infrastructure, improve England's road network and drive growth as part of the plan for change.

First, I am setting out the details of what local highways authorities across England will need to do to unlock their full share of the £500 million funding uplift that the Government have announced for the 2025-26 financial year. This will help ensure that every penny of taxpayer funding for road repairs is delivering results and will help tackle the pothole plague, which is the result of a decade of under-investment by the previous Government.

For the first time ever, local highways authorities will have to publish a succinct report, in plain English, by the end of June, detailing what they are doing to improve the state of their local roads. This will shine a spotlight on what councils are doing with taxpayers' money and allow local people to hold their councils to account. It will help ensure that the additional funding provided by my Department will be spent delivering the improvements that local people have every right to expect.

The Department has provided a template for these reports that sets out the information that is required. Each authority will need to explain how much it is spending on highways maintenance and how this has changed over time. Authorities will also need to give an overall picture of the condition of their roads, and a summary of how many potholes they have filled in each of the last five years, as well as what they are doing to shift their focus to long-term preventive maintenance. They will need to explain what they are doing to minimise the disruption caused by utility companies' street works, and to make their highways networks more resilient to the changing climate.

Local highways authorities will also be required to send some further, more technical information to the Department by the end of October. This will summarise what each authority is doing to follow best practice and deliver innovation and efficiency. Authorities will have to provide information on matters such as whether they carry out customer satisfaction surveys to allow the public to have a say on local priorities, and whether they benchmark their performance with other authorities.

Authorities that comply in full with the requirements will receive their full share of the £500 million funding uplift, which for most authorities will mean an increase of almost 40% on average in highways maintenance funding compared to the current financial year. Authorities that do not meet these requirements will forfeit the final 25% of the funding uplift, with this money then redistributed to other councils to allow them to do even more to fix their local roads.

Secondly, I am providing details of a £4.8 billion interim settlement for National Highways in 2025-26 to keep the strategic road network working for the people and businesses that rely on it every day.

Delivery of this investment focuses heavily on operating, maintaining and enhancing the strategic network. Crucially, there is also a record investment in renewals, which is essential to keeping this vital network in good repair to avoid unplanned disruption, drive productivity and better connect people and business to support growth across the country.

The current road investment strategy (RIS) expires at the end of March 2025, and we intend to set a new multi-year strategy. But this requires time to plan, and the choices we make in that strategy will be informed by this year's spending review.

In the absence of an RIS, I am laying in Parliament statutory directions and guidance to National Highways to cover the exercise of its functions beyond the expiry of the second road investment strategy, from 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026 inclusive.

[HCWS541]

Petition

Monday 24 March 2025

OBSERVATIONS

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Chester-le-Street Post Office

The petition of residents of the constituency of North Durham,

Declares that Chester-le-Street Post Office, which provides vital services to local residents is at risk of closure; and notes that x people have signed a similar online petition on this matter.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to encourage the Post Office to ensure that Chester-le-Street Post Office can remain open.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Presented by Luke Akehurst, Official Report, 30 January 2025; Vol. 761, c. 523.*]

[P003039]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas):

I thank the petitioners for raising concerns regarding the potential closure of the Chester-le-Street post office. Given the Post Office Chair's November 2024 announcement on the future of the Post Office, and subsequent media reports on branch closures, I understand local residents' concerns regarding the Chester-le-Street branch.

No decisions have been made regarding the future of any individual directly managed branches, including the Chester-le-Street post office. We expect the Post Office to fully engage and consult with local communities, Citizens Advice, trade unions and potential future partners to consider how to best meet the needs for post office services in a local area.

The Government protect the post office network by setting minimum access criteria to ensure that 99% of the UK population lives within 3 miles of a post office. The access criteria ensure that, however the network changes, essential services remain within local reach of all citizens.

The Post Office has the freedom to make commercial decisions regarding the composition of its network, providing it fulfils the Government-set access criteria. Decisions around individual branches are a matter for the Post Office.

The Government will continue to work closely with Post Office as it develops its transformation plan, while the Post Office continues to deliver on the 11,500 minimum branch requirements set by the Government.

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PETITION

Monday 24 March 2025

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**not later than
Monday 31 March 2025**

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