

**Friday  
28 March 2025**

**Volume 764  
No. 116**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES  
(HANSARD)**

**Friday 28 March 2025**

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# House of Commons

Friday 28 March 2025

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

## PRAYERS

*The Chairman of Ways and Means took the Chair as Deputy Speaker (Standing Order No. 3).*

## BUSINESS WITHOUT DEBATE

### SPOILIATION ADVISORY PANEL

*Resolved,*

That an Humble Address be presented to His Majesty, That he will be graciously pleased to give directions that there be laid before this House a Return of the Report from the Right Honourable Sir Alan Moses, Chairman of the Spoliation Advisory Panel, dated 28 March 2025, in respect of the painting “Aeneas and his Family Fleeing Burning Troy” by Henry Gibbs now in the possession of the Tate Gallery.—(*Gen Kitchen.*)

**Chris McDonald** (Stockton North) (Lab): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

*Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163)*

*The House divided:* Ayes 0, Noes 44.

**Division No. 156]**

**[9.35 am**

### AYES

**Tellers for the Ayes:**  
**Chris McDonald and**  
**Tristan Osborne**

### NOES

Anderson, Stuart ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra</i> )	Kearns, Alicia ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i> )
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Butler, Dawn	Law, Noah
Chowns, Ellie	Lewis, Clive
Clark, Feryal	Mayhew, Jerome
Conlon, Liam	McCarthy, Kerry
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	McMahon, Jim
Coutinho, rh Claire ( <i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i> )	Minns, Ms Julie
Coyle, Neil	Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Cross, Harriet	Morris, Grahame
Daby, Janet	Morrissey, Joy
Dalton, Ashley	Murray, James
Dearden, Kate	Paul, Rebecca
Denyer, Carla	Peacock, Stephanie
Doughty, Stephen	Pollard, Luke
Evans, Dr Luke	Reeves, Ellie
Ferguson, Mark	Tami, rh Mark
Frith, Mr James	Taylor, Alison
Greenwood, Lilian	Thomas, Fred
Hack, Amanda	Turley, Anna
Hardy, Emma	Western, Andrew
Hillier, Dame Meg	
Hinchliff, Chris	
Johnson, rh Dame Diana	
Joseph, Sojan	

**Tellers for the Noes:**  
**Gen Kitchen and**  
**Taiwo Owatemi**

*Question accordingly negated.*

# Water Bill

## Second Reading

9.50 am

**Clive Lewis** (Norwich South) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Around 50 years ago, Margaret Thatcher's revolution tore up the rulebook on political and economic management. She rewrote it with a single unwavering principle: that the pursuit of profit would serve the public good, even when it came to vital public services—even when it came to water. We often say that society stands on the shoulders of giants, but giants cast long shadows, and Thatcherism's shadow looms dark over our water system today.

Whether we see ourselves standing on her shoulders or trapped in her shadow, one thing is undeniable: she proved that the world can be made differently. And if it can be made differently once, it can be made differently again. That, as the brilliant anthropologist David Graeber understood, is the hidden truth of the world. It is something we create and can choose to create anew. We can do it better.

Today, I want to show this House and this country that water is the lens through which we can imagine something better—a better way of running our economy, a better way of safeguarding our environment and a better way of empowering the public, for whom democracy supposedly exists. But that requires something very difficult: it requires us to break free from the constraints of our imagination and to let go of the idea that this economic model is all there is or all there ever could be.

It saddens me to say that the Government's Water (Special Measures) Act 2025 perfectly exemplifies this failure of imagination. One of its leading proponents has a particular rhetorical flourish they love to use when dismissing calls for public ownership of water. They say, “I'm more interested in the purity of our water than the purity of our ideology.” I love that quote. I love it because it lays bare just how deeply the ideology of privatisation, and all that goes with it, has embedded itself. So entrenched is it within our collective consciousness that we no longer recognise it as an ideology. We no longer see it for what it is: a systemic exploitation of a common resource for private gain. Instead, it has simply become the natural order of things.

But how much longer can this go on? Since the crash of 2008, this ideology has been faltering under the weight of its own contradictions, yet its grip on British politics remains vice-like. Austerity, exploitation and corporate price gouging are still treated not as choices but as inevitabilities. Why? Because too many politicians on both sides of the House refuse to contemplate alternatives. For those on the other side of the House—on the Opposition Benches—I get it: this is their ideology. They are defending their class, and I would imagine they would go further still if they could. But on this side of the House, we have no excuse. We should be standing up for our class: working-class people—the public. Instead, we wrap their ideology in the language of fiscal responsibility, economic prudence and stewardship of the economy. But it is not fiscal responsibility when we

[Clive Lewis]

balance the books on broken backs. It is not stewardship when the ship has been sold off and the crew left to drown. It is not prudence. It is power maintenance.

**Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I hope the engineers can check that the microphones and speakers are working while I ask a quick question. My hon. Friend mentions Members on this side of the House. There are far more of us on this side since July last year than there were in 2019, with a very different approach taken in our manifestos. Does he fear that the shift in tone he is suggesting is one of the reasons that we did so badly in 2019 but so well last year?

**Clive Lewis:** No, I do not. We have a distorted electoral system. Bring on proportional representation, because if we had PR, we would have had a different Government in 2019 and most definitely in 2017. Sometimes politicians have to do what they believe to be right and lead from the front. I think we should lead from the front.

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Ind): I compliment the hon. Member on his Bill. To help his argument, there was overwhelming opinion poll support for public ownership of water in 2017 and 2019, and there still is today.

**Clive Lewis:** I thank the right hon. Member for his point. I will come on to this later, and I hope other Members will pick up on it, but the fact that the public are way ahead of this House on the issue of public ownership is one of the reasons why so many people are losing faith in the two-party political system. One only has to look at some political parties whose Members are not in their place—at the Reform party, for example, which has a policy of public ownership of water. Yes, its Members will privatise the NHS, but they understand how popular this is, and they are ahead of the curve—they are ahead of us on this side.

**Neil Coyle:** Really?

**Clive Lewis:** On the issue of water, yes, I would say they are, because whether I like it or not, Reform has a policy for water to be owned 50% by pension companies and 50% by the public. As much as it grieves me to say it, that is a policy of public ownership. They are populist; they are listening to a popular voice.

**Mr James Frith** (Bury North) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Clive Lewis:** I will make some progress and then give way, and I will also try to keep the volume down a little bit.

This is about the maintenance of a political and economic model that was never built to serve the public—a model designed to shield the wealth of asset holders, landlords, shareholders, corporations and, yes, privatised water companies. But here is the great irony: the very greed, recklessness and contempt of the water industry—its excesses—have cracked open the door, and through that crack, we glimpse an opportunity. It is an opportunity to shatter the myth of privatisation's inevitability, to break free from the narrow, self-imposed rules that have

caged our Government's economic choices, to expose its failures, to challenge its dominance and, above all, to show this country that there is an alternative—an alternative that is democratic, sustainable and run in the interests of the many, not the few. We can do it better.

**Mr Frith:** My hon. Friend is making a typically impassioned speech. He says the general public are ahead of us. Where might that same public be when faced with the bill for bringing in the nationalisation he is clearly wedded to? Furthermore, in the event that we do not have to buy the water industry but seize it, the implications of that seizure will cause an economic collapse. At what point will he take responsibility for either of those scenarios when confronting a public who are, he says, ahead of us on this issue?

**Clive Lewis:** I will obviously come to many of those points later in my speech, but let me make this point now: I do not believe in nationalisation, and this Bill has nothing to do with nationalisation. This is about giving the public a say over their water. It is about governance, standards and democracy.

**Mr Frith:** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Clive Lewis:** No, my hon. Friend has made his point.

**Mr Frith:** On this point?

**Clive Lewis:** No, I am going to carry on and make some progress. You made your point. Let the public—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Order. Mr Lewis, I do not believe I was making a point at all.

**Clive Lewis:** My apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker; I should have said that my hon. Friend made his point.

The clock is ticking. The climate crisis is no longer a distant warning. It is our lived reality. Rising droughts, creeping desertification, depleted aquifers, wildfires, systemic collapse—these are no longer projections; they are the forecast turned fact. Preparing for this future and adapting to what is now inevitable has never been more urgent.

The evidence is sobering. The UK's water resources are under mounting pressure and not just from the climate emergency, but from rising demand and population growth. Experts now project that England could face significant water supply deficits as early as 2034 unless we act decisively. That is not a distant horizon; it is a little over a decade away.

But while the threat has grown, our resilience has shrunk, because while the climate crisis has intensified, our water infrastructure has stood still, or, worse, been sold off, hollowed out and left to rot. In the 35 years before privatisation almost 100 reservoirs were built; in the 35 years since privatisation, not one major English reservoir has been built. But it gets worse, because in that same period private water companies have sold off 25 reservoirs without replacing one. Instead of investing in resilience, they have extracted value: £72 billion paid out in dividends while pipes leak, rivers choke, and the public pays the price. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Frith) asks how we can afford it; how

can we not afford it? That is not mismanagement; it is a betrayal. If scientists tell us the climate crisis is an existential threat to humanity and to this country—

**Grahame Morris** (Easington) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Clive Lewis:** One second.

If scientists tell us the climate crisis is an existential threat to humanity and to this country, we must treat it as such: an existential conflict. In that context, the actions of these companies—selling off reservoirs, failing to invest, polluting our water—are not just negligent; they are acts that actively undermine our national water security. In any other existential crisis, we might call that what it is: sabotage. And in a time of national peril, sabotage has another name: treason.

Let me explain why this matters to me personally. When I served on tour in Afghanistan back in 2009—not in a boy band—I experienced something utterly alien to me: the gnawing fear of thirst; not the mild irritation of forgetting a water bottle, but the deep physical worry that there may not be enough clean water to get through the day. In Britain, we have been blessed: water falls from the sky; it fills our rivers, it soaks our fields, and we joke about it—it is part of who we are. But in Afghanistan there was no humour; only heat, dust and desperation. There I saw children trekking miles through the desert, not for food, not for money, but to beg for clean bottled water. Once we have seen that, and once we have felt that fear, we can never take water for granted again. We never again believe it is something we can waste or pollute or privatise without consequence.

That is why I have brought forward this Bill: because anger is not enough; outrage, no matter how justified, will not fix the pipes, stop the sewage or fill the reservoirs. We need a plan. We need a strategy. We need a future. We can do it better.

My Water Bill delivers that. It sets out the high standards our country deserves and the democratic governance our water system desperately needs. First, it establishes clear, ambitious targets to stop the sewage in our rivers and on our beaches, to restore our water to high ecological and chemical standards, and to deliver universal, affordable access to water as a basic human right—a right we have never had before in this country. It demands a system designed not just to extract profit but to adapt, to build resilience in the face of climate change, and to harness nature-based solutions that work with the environment, not against it.

Secondly, it transforms governance. The Bill introduces representation for workers and local communities on the boards of water companies. It gives voting rights to employees and customers, so that those who use and maintain a system have a real say in how it is run. Water is not a commodity but a common good, and those who depend on it and pay for it should help govern it.

Thirdly, the Bill lays the foundations for a democratic future. It establishes a commission on water ownership to advise the Secretary of State on long-term strategy, looking at international best practice, especially in OECD countries, where public water ownership is the norm, not the exception. Crucially, it creates a citizens' assembly on water ownership to bring the public into the process, to deliberate, debate and decide how we can govern this most precious of resources.

The public care, but how do I know that? I know because a small fraction of them are in the Public Gallery today, having travelled here from all over the country; I know because of the thousands of emails that have been sent to MPs across the House; and I know because those people will never stop campaigning until this injustice is resolved. They know that we can protect something not by selling it off, but by standing up for it, involving people in its care and ensuring that it serves the public, today, tomorrow and for generations to come.

My Bill offers a pathway out of crisis. It offers control, resilience and democracy. It is not just about cleaning up our rivers, but about cleaning up the system that allowed them to be polluted in the first place. Privatisation is not just a problem—it is the problem. We can do it better. I can hear some people on the Labour Benches thinking, “But we have just passed”—

**Dawn Butler** (Brent East) (Lab): You can hear thinking?

**Clive Lewis:** I can now—for my next trick, I can hear thinking! I can hear them thinking, “But we have just passed the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, Clive, so what are you talking about?” Yes, we have, but I am afraid to say it has been watered down—[*Interruption.*] Sorry, I had to get that one in—it was all going so well. The Act does not live up to what was promised, it does not deliver what is needed, and it certainly does not live up to its name. Do not get me wrong: it is a start.

**Grahame Morris:** I congratulate my good and hon. Friend on making an excellent speech and on advocating for public ownership of water and the opportunity to make things better. Does he agree that the mismanagement of the water companies under privatisation is a huge indictment of the whole principle? In my area, bills are way above inflation and huge dividends are being paid by borrowing money. At the very least, should our Government not be looking at stopping the payment of bonuses and share dividends while sewage pollution continues, and we have appalling mismanagement of the industry?

**Clive Lewis:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I agree with him wholeheartedly and I am just about to come to that point in relation to what the Water (Special Measures) Act does and does not do. It addresses some of those points, but as we have already discussed, privatisation is not just a problem, but the problem, and it is a big part of why so much has gone wrong.

Unfortunately, the Water (Special Measures) Act does not live up to what was promised or what is needed, and it certainly does not live up to its name. However, it is a start, and I praise my colleagues on the Front Bench, including the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), who has done so much work in this area. Unfortunately, the Act is not a solution.

Remarkably, my Government's Water (Special Measures) Act does not even define what clean water means. There are no standards or targets—just vague intentions handed over once again to a regulatory system that has already failed us and to the companies that caused the mess in the first place. It says nothing about better governance,



[Clive Lewis]

and absolutely nothing about the big, fat, humongous elephant in the room: who owns our water? If we do not deal with ownership, we cannot deal with accountability. If we cannot deal with accountability, we can forget clean water. No—we must go further on clean water standards, corporate accountability and what happens when companies fail.

**Noah Law** (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): Does my hon. and gallant Friend accept that there is increased accountability in the Water (Special Measures) Act through the fact that many companies in the industry are now rewriting their articles of association to ensure that they are accountable not just to shareholders, but to the customers and users of water?

**Clive Lewis:** After 35 years of abject failure, it is too little, too late. My Bill would put the final nail in the coffin of this sorry chapter of our country's water and water system.

**Neil Coyle:** Sticking with the puns, I commend my hon. Friend on his gallons of passion; he is always making waves. He criticises the Government's legislation, which is obviously not yet in effect, but does he think that the Cunliffe commission will go any way towards addressing some of the concerns he has outlined?

**Clive Lewis:** Unfortunately, I do not, because again the elephant in the room—who owns our water—has been ruled out of the Cunliffe commission's operational process. It cannot actually look at that issue. I have no issue with Sir Jon Cunliffe, but let us not forget that he originates from the Treasury—he probably has Treasury brain. That economic orthodoxy is part of the reason why we are in the place that we are. I do not have so much confidence in the Cunliffe commission, but I do have far more confidence in the People's Commission on the Water Sector, which is being run by academics and which will report at the same time. I will be very interested to hear what it says.

**Neil Coyle:** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Clive Lewis:** Those are the reasons why I have brought forward this Bill. The Government's Act does none of those things, but my Bill does. Take just one example—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Order. I believe Mr Lewis probably cannot hear interventions, because he is so loud himself. Members should intervene loudly if they wish to intervene.

**Clive Lewis:** I did hear the intervention, but I wanted to make some progress.

Take this one example. Under this Bill, if a water company breaches the terms of its licence with a major sewage discharge, it can forget shareholder payout and piling on more debt. If it does it twice, it is in the last chance saloon. After three strikes, it is out—licence terminated and on its bike—and those price-gouging, asset-stripping, river-killing vulture capitalist outfits will be rolled into the sunset without a penny in compensation. What about those water infrastructure assets that they have been sweating for private gain? They go back into

the public realm, thank you very much. If they start whining about debts, do not worry: we will do a full audit of what they invested, what they racked up in debt, what they paid out in dividends and what they stuffed into bloated executive pay packets. I will tell you this, Madam Deputy Speaker: I am yet to see a single privatised English water company walk away with anything other than a well-earned spanking and a sharp haircut for its creditors. Those assets will belong to the public once again, and we will not pay a penny more than they are worth.

I can hear people thinking, "Where will the money come from? How will you invest in publicly owned water without the private sector?" I will tell them where it has not come from in these past 35 years—I am mind-reading again.

**Mark Ferguson** (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Clive Lewis:** I will just make some progress, and then I will give way. I am on a roll. Let me tell the House where the money has not come from for these past 35 years. It has not come from private shareholders or long-term thinking, and it certainly has not come from some mythical well of benevolent capitalism. The private companies have put in less than nothing; in fact, they have racked up more than £60 billion in debt. Thames Water has paid more than £7.2 billion in dividends since privatisation, and is now £15.2 billion in debt and counting—work that out. Now, it is trying to plug the hole with a £3 billion emergency loan that will cost 10% in annual interest. That is more than half a billion pounds a year, just for interest payments, courtesy of our bills. That money will not build a reservoir, fix a pipe or clean a river, but it will keep a rotten system afloat for a little longer.

**Noah Law:** My hon. and gallant Friend makes an impassioned case for public ownership—something that, in the right context, I am sure Members on all sides of the House can celebrate. On the point about the cost of financing to the public, though, does he agree that while there are some serious indiscretions in parts of the industry, such as in Thames Water's case, this conversation about the appropriate financing model would be better entertained at a time when the cost of capital in the private water industry was not lower than the cost of public sector borrowing, on which, of course, we are in a very difficult situation?

**Clive Lewis:** The cheapest borrowing in the country, without a doubt, is public sector borrowing. The private water industry, which has had 35 years to sort this mess out, is not going to find investment. It is up to its eyeballs in debt. It is relying on a 50% increase in our bills by 2030, if we include inflation, and that is in the middle of a cost of living crisis. How can we justify that? The answer is that we cannot.

**Mr Frith:** The day after the seizure of public assets that my hon. Friend is describing, billions and billions of pounds of debt will come with it. What does he propose to do with that debt, other than refinancing, which is exactly where we are at now with the industry

requirement to refinance the debt to try to keep bills down? Instead, he is advocating that the public purse take on that private debt.

**Clive Lewis:** At the beginning of my now seemingly rather long speech, I think I referred to a failure of imagination. Ask what Margaret Thatcher would have done when she was faced with similar problems. She would have fought her way through it. She changed the very fabric of our economy, our democracy and our politics, and she made it work. We can do the same, because the public are behind us. They want this to work.

**Mr Frith** *rose*—

**Mark Ferguson** *rose*—

**Clive Lewis:** I will make some progress. Let us recap, because I do not want to go on too long; I want to conclude, if I can. That money from Thames Water—that half a billion pounds in interest payments—will keep a rotten system afloat for just a little longer. The myth of privatisation is that the private sector will act in the long-term interests of the British public because it wants to turn a profit. That is preposterous, as is proven by the state of our water, and exhibit A is Thames Water.

We can now turn to the question of where the investment will come from. Under public ownership, it will come from the only place it ever should have—from us, the public—and every penny of it will go back into the system. It will go into the pipes, the rivers, the seas we swim in and the water we drink. There will be a direct relationship between what we pay and what we get, with no offshore dividends, no bloated bonuses and no debt-laden shell games—just clean, accountable, democratic water.

When I was in Afghanistan, every soldier had one critical duty: to stay hydrated. To dehydrate was considered a military offence, because it put the soldier and their team at risk. If someone ran out of water, we did not debate markets or metrics; we shared what we had. We had each other's backs. As the desert-dwelling Fremen in James Herbert's novel "Dune" believed:

"A man's flesh is his own; the water belongs to the tribe".

It is time our water returned to the tribe, to the people, to the public. We can do better; we must, and with this Bill, we will. I commend it to the House.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Before I call the next Member, I trust that the microphones have been adjusted to their normal level.

10.20 am

**Carla Denyer** (Bristol Central) (Green): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for that hospital pass. I will make a note not to follow the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) again, if I can help it. I will just try to do a good job, and perhaps not to speak for quite as long.

I am delighted to be here to discuss and support this Bill, and I thank the hon. Member for bringing it forward. It will be no surprise to anyone here that I am

absolutely in favour of this Bill to fix the despicable situation of our waterways. To do that, we need to bring water back into public ownership. This issue is so important to me and my Green colleagues that we tabled the first early-day motion of this Parliament on the public ownership of water. We highlighted that sewage was

"being discharged into English waterways for more than 3.6 million hours in 2023...that water companies in England have incurred debts of more than £64 billion and paid out £78 billion in dividends"—

note the similarity of those numbers—

"since they were privatised debt-free in 1989".

We pointed out that

"water companies paid out £1.4 billion in dividends in 2022, even as 11 of them were fined in the same year for missing performance targets".

Privatisation is just not working. The experiment has failed. We are one of the only countries in the world with a fully privatised water system, which shows that it is a bad idea. Water is a natural monopoly. For example, people who live in the south-west, as I do, cannot choose to be supplied by Yorkshire Water. I am not sure that they would want to, but my point is that when their provider gives a poor service and charges extortionate sums, they cannot take their business elsewhere. There is no fair competition. You get what you get, and you cannot get upset about it—but we are upset about it, because sewage is being pumped into our water, and we are paying through the nose for the privilege, all while shareholders profit.

**Neil Coyle:** On the point about taking business elsewhere, do the Greens have a policy on how to perpetually nationalise an industry? One of the difficulties is that if we nationalise now, a future Government can do something very different. What is the Greens' position on that?

**Carla Denyer:** One of the reasons why I support the Bill brought forward by the hon. Member for Norwich South is that it uses the tool of a citizens' assembly to ask the public how they think the system should work, and to explore different options, rather than predetermining the exact model. For clarity, the Green party and I support public ownership of public services, but that does not necessarily mean nationalisation. Before the water companies were privatised, they were owned regionally, and I think that would be a sensible model this time. I also think that the citizens' assembly could look into other forms of public ownership, such as co-operatives.

**Neil Coyle** *rose*—

**Chris McDonald** (Stockton North) (Lab) *rose*—

**Carla Denyer:** I will make some progress, rather than having a long back and forth.

We are paying through inflated bills, paying with our health, and now we may be paying with our public money, as the Government have said that they are ready to bail out Thames Water, which was privatised in 1989 with no debt. Since then, it has racked up £14.7 billion in debt and at the same time—note the similarity of these numbers—paid out £10.4 billion to its shareholders. If that is not a scam, I do not know what is. Privatisation

[Carla Denyer]

was supposed to keep prices down, but it has done the opposite. More than one third of people's bills is used to pay interest on debt, or to pay dividends to shareholders.

The Government are taking some steps to improve the situation. I absolutely welcome those steps, as far as they go, but these issues are not likely to go away without our considering the option, or looking into the possibility, of bringing water companies back into public hands. That is why I was disappointed to learn that the Government's supposedly independent commission on the water sector regulatory system is not being allowed—despite being independent—to consider public ownership as one of the options, though I note with interest the establishment of the people's commission on the water sector, which will look into this option as part of its broader scope.

**Chris McDonald:** This is a subject on which I value the hon. Lady's opinion. My greatest concern about this Bill is the people's commission, and I wonder if she could assuage my concern. I fear that setting up an alternative representative body impinges on the rights of this Chamber, which is the prime expression of democracy in the UK, and that the two could be brought into conflict. It is a big concern for me. Is there anything that she can say to assuage my concern?

**Carla Denyer:** If hon. Members of this House feel threatened by the setting up of a citizens' assembly in order to gather views, that may be an indication of the weakness of the democracy that we have in this place. I really value the contribution that citizens' assemblies can make. They have been used in other countries, notably Ireland. They are not a replacement for the House of Commons, but they can add valuable extra detail.

**Ellie Chowns** (North Herefordshire) (Green) *rose*—

**Carla Denyer:** I think my hon. Friend is about to chip in with an example.

**Ellie Chowns:** Does my hon. Friend agree that we have the example of the citizens' assembly on climate change, which was established jointly by six Select Committees of this House a couple of years ago?

**Carla Denyer:** I agree with my hon. Friend, and I would also point to the citizens' assembly set up by Bristol city council. Citizens' assemblies are particularly strong at looking in depth at detailed, specific questions, rather than broad topics to do with how the entire country is run. I see citizens' assemblies not as replacing the role of the House of Commons, but as supplementing it valuably.

**Neil Coyle:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Carla Denyer:** I will make some progress.

**Neil Coyle:** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I ask for your direction? This is a debate, and there is no time limit. Is there any way of pressing a Member to answer a question during a debate, or to at least allow a debate to occur? I had a follow-up question that the hon. Member seems reluctant to allow.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** The hon. Gentleman knows that it is entirely up to the Member who is speaking to decide whether they wish to take or reject an intervention, just as it is up to Members attempting to make an intervention to either persist in the attempt or not. We will let the debate continue, but the hon. Gentleman is right to say that there is plenty of time.

**Carla Denyer:** The provision of water—

**Neil Coyle:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Carla Denyer:** One last time, though the hon. Member is pushing it.

**Neil Coyle:** I am very grateful. The reason why I persist is that the issue of a citizens' assembly has come up. My previous question was: how could a Government—any Government—bind the actions of a future democratically elected Government? A citizens' assembly does not have the power to do that. I am intrigued; how can the Greens believe that a citizens' assembly could bind a future Government, of any political persuasion, to not re-privatising our water industry?

**Carla Denyer:** Of course a current Government cannot bind a future Government on a decision like that indefinitely, and I was not suggesting that they could, but as I pointed out, as England is one of very few countries on the entire planet with a fully privatised water system, I suspect and hope that if we returned to a public system, it would be more likely to stay public, as both elected representatives and the public would see that the system performed better when the profit motive was removed.

**Clive Lewis:** People talk about whether something can be taken out of public control and put back into privatisation. Of course, Parliament is sovereign and that can always happen, but there is a point about giving control to the public. Let us take the NHS, which is a public service. Any Government in the post-war period could have taken the NHS back into privatisation. Why did they not do so? They would not have dared, because it would have been so publicly damaging and politically destructive. That is what would happen with our water. Does the hon. Member agree? [*Interruption.*]

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Order. May I remind people in the Public Gallery to remain silent?

**Carla Denyer:** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the hon. Gentleman for that helpful reminder about the analogy with the national health service.

Public ownership is not just essential for social and environmental justice; it is also, in this situation, a pragmatic necessity. It just makes sense, which is why almost everyone else does things that way. With water back in public hands, the Government could invest in fixing the crumbling infrastructure and cleaning up our rivers, or preventing them from getting into such a state in the first place, without haemorrhaging money to shareholders and allowing it to spill over—sorry; I couldn't resist—into fat cats' salaries.



People are struggling to put food on the table and heat their homes. We cannot allow water companies to contribute to that situation by hiking up the bills that everyone has to pay. Without real change, we will not stop sewage flowing into our rivers and profits flowing into the pockets of shareholders. There is an obvious answer that makes both people and the environment the winners: if they so choose, the Government could bring water companies back into public hands, to end the profiteering, drive down bills, protect our rivers, waterways and coastline, and catch up with the public who, as the hon. Member for Norwich South pointed out, are way ahead of the Labour Government on this issue and much else.

10.32 am

**Dame Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) on introducing the Bill. Whatever my position on its detail and on the history of what has happened with our water industry, we would all agree on how important it is to have a proper debate about water.

Unlike many of the Members present today, I have the privilege of having served in the previous Parliament, during which water and sewage discharge were constant topics of conversation. It is absolutely right that we talk about that and that we act. I am now proud to be in the party of a Government who have begun to act on the big challenges facing us when it comes to water.

I congratulate my hon. Friend, too, on the enormous passion that he brings to all the issues that he cares about. Nobody could say that he does not believe passionately in what he is talking about today. He is right to shine a light on the failures of the water industry—the profits that people are making while organisations such as Surfers Against Sewage have to deal with the very real issue of paddling through sewage. I am trying to be polite.

We have to go right back in time to see why the system was set up. The water companies were privatised to avoid taxpayer investment and to get the private sector to pay. That of course meant the need for dividends, and we have seen how that has worked. My hon. Friend talked about the last chance saloon—“Two strikes and you’re out”—for the water companies. His Bill suggests that on the second occasion, the state would take the company’s assets and run it, but the taxpayer would still pick up an enormous bill for that.

It is important to reflect on the context that we find ourselves in today, whether we are talking about investment in water, our railways, the 700,000 pupils in schools not fit for purpose, or in our crumbling hospitals—including the 40 built with reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete, which I visited during the last Parliament. Those will be unfit for purpose within the next five years and need money to be invested in them.

We need to invest money in our roads. It is great that the Government are putting money into potholes—that is a start. However, we know that we need more than that. I cycle, and potholes cause me enormous grief. I am constantly breaking a spoke. A spoke is only about £1.50, but getting a wheel trued—I am not expert enough to do that myself—costs a lot of money. These

are issues that are actually hitting the pockets of our constituents. It is not about me; many people have these problems.

I have had the opportunity to spend a lot of time in Northamptonshire, and I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough and Rushden (Gen Kitchen), who has fought a tough campaign against potholes in her constituency, underlining how poorly the council has managed its roads. She has done excellent work to highlight the problems and to challenge and look at the council’s contracts, and that has led to the Government’s announcement in just the last week about investing in potholes—they have taken her blueprint from Wellingborough and are applying it to the country.

However, all this costs money. We have roads, railways, the water industry, schools and hospitals all in dire need. We need that money to go into the NHS to reduce waiting lists, which have reduced for five months in a row. We are seeing those waiting lists go down. Constituents of mine were in desperate straits—anyone who had a bit of money was paying privately to have their hip replaced. The constituents I visited who did not have that kind of money were on a long, slow waiting list while their health deteriorated, unable to work or go about their lives.

We have to see this issue in the context of all the money that needs to be spent. A year ago, I produced a list of what I call the big nasties. I have highlighted some of them. The list also includes the fact that we have not yet in this country decommissioned a single nuclear submarine, which is not just a monetary cost. It needs to be done, but we are finding it hard to bring submarines into port to repair them. It has been left for decades, and has now fallen to this Government to resolve. I gather that the first one is now being decommissioned—thanks, again, to a Labour Government being in power.

We have real problems at the animal health centre in Weybridge, where we do not have space to deal with two zoonotic diseases at the same time. To deal with these difficult diseases, the centre has special facilities so that no contaminants can escape. If we were hit by two zoonotic diseases in this country, we would be in a catastrophic situation. This situation was left by the previous Government, who did not deal with it for 14 years.

Then we have Porton Down. In 2017, it was going to be moved and rebuilt. Again, the facility deals with some of the most difficult scientific issues; there could be catastrophic effects if it was not there to deal with them. What has happened? There has been no movement at all. Again, it has fallen to this Government to spend something. Around £700 million had been spent, but nothing had been achieved. This Government have picked up the pieces.

**Clive Lewis:** I thank my hon. Friend for making a powerful speech in this debate. There are a few things to say about the costs. First, we would control the assets. The assets would come off the balance sheet, which would be one mitigating factor. Secondly, throughout the post-war period, with British Leyland, Railtrack in 1945, coal, steel, gas, civil aviation and even the Bank of England, we paid less than the market value. As I explained at the beginning, this is about a mindset. We can do an audit of what the companies have taken out—what money they have extracted from our economy—

[Clive Lewis]

and then we can pay them an appropriate rate and return. It may well be that they are paid nothing, but they may get something. Their creditors may take a haircut, but, frankly, that is better than our constituents taking a continuous haircut with their bills.

**Dame Meg Hillier:** I thank my hon. Friend for that point. I hear his passion and his helpful iteration of those historic examples. However, I would also say that we need to be clear about who the shareholders are—very often, they are our pension funds. Pension fund trustees have a fiduciary duty to ensure they are maximising the income for those pensioners. If that does not happen, we know that, effectively, the taxpayer picks up the tab. A reality of privatisation was a drive to have a shareholder society. We can argue about whether that was the right or wrong thing to do, and I think we would probably agree in many respects on that. However, that is the reality of the situation now.

Earlier today, before the House was sitting, I was on a call about constituents who had lost money in an investment and are in a desperate situation. In that case, it was because of criminal activity by a fraudster. Their life savings have gone. The people who have invested and bought those shares, often very humble families who have worked hard all their lives, need some compensation. A student debating society might be tempted to say, “Let’s take it all back, and forget about the impact,” but we cannot forget about the impact, because it often falls on low-paid, hard-working people who are taxpayers too—they would end up paying a double whammy.

**Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con):** I thank the Chair of the Treasury Committee for her wise words about the risks that shareholders take when they invest. Has she considered the alternative? At the moment, we are talking about privatisation versus nationalisation, but the alternative is mutualisation, where a water company’s customers would own and control the company on their own behalf.

**Dame Meg Hillier:** It seems there are an awful lot of mind readers in the Chamber today, because the hon. Gentleman anticipates my comments. I am proud to be a Labour and Co-operative Member, so I have thoughts on how, one day, we may be able to move to that nirvana of co-ownership.

We have seen too often that dividends and bonuses are paid without investment in infrastructure, which is where my hon. Friend and I would agree. We have a privatisation model that was supposed to deliver investment on the back of people investing in shares. In return for getting a dividend, there would also be an investment, but we have not seen enough of that.

Of course, under Ofwat rules, water customers bear a share of the cost. In Hackney, under Thames Water, which has been a poster company for the problems in this sector, bills are going up by more than a third. A number of constituents who are very worried about their water bills have written to me just in the last fortnight. When we talk about money in this place, we sometimes talk about millions or billions of pounds, but £100 a month is a great deal of money for many of my constituents.

To set that in context, I have a number of fantastic street markets in my constituency—ones where people can buy fruit and veg, and clothes and underwear at a reasonable price—and I also have the lovely Broadway market, where sourdough bread costs about £5 a loaf. I have constituents who do not have £5 left at the end of the week, let alone at the end of the month—those are the margins that people are working with. Water bills are therefore a significant issue, which is another reason why I am delighted to be here today, supported by colleagues of all parties who want to talk about the challenges of water.

On the face of it, the argument for nationalisation sounds appealing to many, but there is a cost—and it is not a hidden cost: to those who bought shares in good faith, to those pension funds that are investing, and in the upheaval of turning around these companies. Where would we get the people to run a nationalised water company? It is likely to be the same executives, if they would take the pay cut. There is not a wealth of expertise.

I spent a decade examining the work of Whitehall, and there are some excellent civil servants in this country who have done amazing work—many of the civil servants who did not do such amazing work appeared before the Public Accounts Committee—but finding somebody overnight with the technical and management expertise to run a major water company is a challenge.

To take the corollary, I am passionate about seeing insourced services in our hospitals, but after having intense conversations with executives at my local hospital, I know that, when the public sector has not done something for many years, it takes a very long time to build up the expertise. Let us take catering. If hospitals do not cater well, they could kill patients, so they need to make sure they have the management structure in place to deliver those skills. It is the same with water companies—it is not as easy as saying, “One day it’s private, and the next day it’s national. No problem at all.” The upheaval would be immense, so we need a measured plan, and I think this Government have begun to develop that plan, for all the reasons I will outline.

I will talk a little about what the Government will do to improve the situation, and then I will talk about the Bill, but I want first to touch on the comments of the hon. Member for Bristol Central (Carla Denyer). I am very interested in her passionate commitment to citizens’ juries. She has been elected, which is a privilege as we all know, to represent her constituents in this place, yet months after her election, she wants to pass responsibility for this big, difficult decision to a citizens’ jury, rather than taking responsibility for that decision as an elected MP.

**Ellie Chowns:** I think it is important to correct the misapprehension among some Government Members, which may arise from an inadvertent misreading of the Bill. Clause 4, on the citizens’ assembly on water ownership, at subsection (4), simply says:

“The Commission must publish the recommendations of the Citizens’ Assembly.”

It does not say, “This House will hereby delegate responsibility for making decisions about water sector ownership to the Citizens’ Assembly.” It simply suggests setting up a structure, which, as I said, has already been used by the House to provide the opportunity for the general public to consider in depth an issue of complexity.

**Dame Meg Hillier:** My point is clear. Just as, many years ago, a certain Mr Ratner famously talked about the price of a prawn sandwich in Marks & Spencer and the price of earrings in his store, people do not want to be on the board of Marks & Spencer to get a decent prawn sandwich; they just want to be able to buy a decent prawn sandwich, and while my political foundations are in devolution, neighbourhood structures, working and listening to people, ultimately we must responsibility ourselves.

I am looking at clause 4, as the hon. Lady highlighted. I have been around for many years, but one of the challenges about citizens' juries is that while we can have this engagement, they are lengthy and costly, and we know that not everybody attends the whole time. How would we select people? There are many challenges in setting them up.

**Ellie Chowns** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Order. I remind the hon. Member that interventions should be short.

**Ellie Chowns:** I remind the House briefly that all these issues are well investigated and understood, and the House has previously used this mechanism effectively.

**Dame Meg Hillier:** Well, in my experience of 20 years in the House, this system has been used once, and that was in 2019, by a selection of Select Committees, not by the Government of the day. I am aware that the first debates about citizens' juries were 30 or so years ago, and there are many challenges to delivering them.

**Mark Ferguson:** Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the concerns with citizens' assemblies is about gaining the confidence of the public? When some people see opinion polls, they say, "Well, I wasn't interviewed, so I have no confidence in it." Secondly, there would be no power to compel someone to be on a citizens' assembly, so how could people have confidence in a body that contains only those who were willing to take part?

**Dame Meg Hillier:** Absolutely. I think we would all agree that we talk all the time to constituents, whether on doorsteps or at public meetings and other forums, because that is our job. I say to constituents every week when I am on their doorsteps, "I am here because I need your expertise. I can't do my job without you." But it is a cumbersome task to be on a citizens' assembly as it requires people to devote a great deal of time, and only a certain subset of society has the time to do that. Many of my constituents are working three or four jobs and struggling to survive. They do not have the time to do that, but their voices need to be heard, too.

**Ellie Chowns:** I declare experience in this area in that, through Herefordshire council, I set up a citizens' assembly. A process called sortition is used to ensure a fully representative sample. Participants are paid for their time so that people of all socioeconomic backgrounds can participate, and additional efforts are made to ensure that under-represented groups can participate. Will the hon. Lady acknowledge that such an institution might be more representative of the general public than this House, in which two thirds of MPs were elected by only a third of the electorate?

**Dame Meg Hillier:** I will be careful not to try your patience, Madam Deputy Speaker. We could have an endless debate about the difference between selecting people through the sortition process—I am well aware of how that works—and how our electoral system works, but, in the end, we face our electorate, and they can reject us. Many colleagues have been sacked on television at 4 o'clock in the morning because the electorate rejected them or their party. There is no same power over a citizen's assembly.

Let us be clear. Perhaps I should talk in a bit more detail about clause 4 of the Bill as proposed. Subsection (1) says:

"Within four months of being established under subsection (3), the Commission on Water must establish a Citizens' Assembly on Water Ownership...to...consider different models of water ownership, and...make recommendations for reforms to water ownership and governance."

**Neil Coyle:** It is deeply patronising to suggest to my constituents that they would be guaranteed the same job after serving on a citizens' assembly. We cannot force or compel McDonald's to retain people on zero-hours contracts, which, thankfully, the Government will scrap. But is it not typical of the Green party to shirk responsibility to a citizens' assembly? On housing, wind farms and onshore energy, we see the Green party shirking responsibilities in Bristol, Brighton and the east of England, and this similar situation is a classic example.

**Dame Meg Hillier:** I certainly recognise the point about job security. Many of my constituents work three or four jobs and are struggling to survive.

**Dawn Butler:** I would like to inform the House that the Employment Rights Bill outlaws exploitative zero-hours contracts, and that is something that Members—especially Government Members—should talk about constantly.

**Dame Meg Hillier:** Absolutely, and that is a yet another example of why it is good to have a Labour Government.

**Chris McDonald:** I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting clause 4(1)(a), in particular. I was quite disappointed by the response from the hon. Member for Bristol Central (Carla Denyer) to my very sincere intervention. I think we have heard that many Members have made their minds up about the form of ownership, and they are determined to have nationalisation. So if the citizens' assembly came to a conclusion that was not in favour of nationalisation, I would have to ask people whether they agreed with the citizens' assembly—in which case, what is the point of this House?—or whether they would ignore the citizens' assembly, in which case, what is the point of the citizens' assembly?

**Dame Meg Hillier:** That is one of the challenges: we can set up this lengthy and expensive process and then it does not necessarily hold any sway.

I was going through the provisions in clause 4, and as we get into the details of the citizens' assembly, I sense that there is an appetite to discuss that. Perhaps I can continue my remarks before I take any further interventions, or we will be here all day—but I suppose that that is what today is for. The commission would support the work of the citizens' assembly. Clause 4(2) states that



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“the Commission on Water must undertake a public consultation on water ownership in which all individuals who use water and sewerage services in England and Wales can participate.”

Hallelujah to that—to a strong, well-founded public consultation! We can all go out to our constituencies and do roundtables, knock on doors and ask people what they have to say about water. However, I think that most of us have had quite a strong indication about that from our constituents, in our mailboxes and from our time on doorsteps—I have not got into all the issues in the waterways in Hackney, which are utterly appalling in relation to sewage discharge. We need to make sure that we have that public consultation.

**Carla Denyer:** If the hon. Member is so aware of the overwhelming public support for public ownership of water, as she just indicated from the level of concern in her constituency, I am confused about why she is so dogged in her pursuit of continued privatisation.

**Dame Meg Hillier:** I urge the hon. Lady to listen to what I say. I did not say that I had people saying overwhelmingly that they wanted public ownership—certainly not. They are saying that there is a problem, and saying, “You lot are in government. You need to sort it out.” Over the last 20 years that I have been in this place, and particularly in the last Parliament, there has been endless discussion about how to resolve this situation, and stasis in the Government. We now have a Government who have acted to begin to tackle some of these huge challenges. I give real credit to the Minister, who has engaged massively with Members across the House on this. She is absolutely aware of the issues, partly because many of us across the House have lobbied her, because our constituents have lobbied us. I do not think there is doubt about the problem; the issue is about the solution.

We should absolutely have a big public consultation, but that is to inform the work of the citizens’ assembly. Clause 4(3) states that the citizens’ assembly must

“be composed of a randomly selected representative sample of users of water and sewerage services in England and Wales, and...consider any matters which the Commission refers to it in relation to water ownership.”

I want to be clear that that will be a randomly selected representative sample of users, and the Bill is silent on the model. I appreciate what the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns) highlighted—that there is a science to doing this—but the Bill is silent on how it would be done.

**Mark Ferguson:** To return to the construction of citizens’ assemblies, I take on board the point about the concept that is being used locally, but when one has to travel 10 minutes to a meeting on an evening after work, it is a very different order of magnitude—

**Carla Denyer:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Mark Ferguson:** Members cannot intervene on an intervention.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Are you nearing your point?

**Mark Ferguson:** I am on the cusp of it. There are cost implications of asking members of the public to travel to another part of the country, and these things are

inevitably in London. As somebody whose constituency is 250 miles from London, I would be concerned about members of my community being left out of such a consultation.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Order. Before the hon. Lady responds to that intervention, I know it is Friday but you do not intervene on an intervention, and interventions are short. They are not speeches.

**Dame Meg Hillier:** I think my hon. Friend makes some important points. We have seen from citizens’ juries, including in Ireland, which has a well-worn route for using these for their referenda, that people do drop out and do not always attend, because life gets in the way. That is why we are elected: to make hard decisions and defend difficult issues. We cannot make the world like the land of milk and honey—certainly not after the inheritance we received from the last Government after 14 years of mismanagement.

We have very big challenges and we need to tackle them. It would put heavy pressure on citizens’ juries to do that. The key point here is that, whatever the best practice, the Bill does not go into the detail of it, so we cannot assume that the good practice that the hon. Member for North Herefordshire has highlighted from her constituency is necessarily what would apply—let alone the challenges that other hon. Members have raised.

Turning to the hon. Member for Bristol Central, I would be surprised that a member of her party is so willing to pass responsibility over, but then I look at what happened in Brighton when the Greens controlled Brighton council. I will put aside the rubbish collection issue and the infighting and look at the issue with the i360—the tower that is now a tourist attraction. The company behind it went bust with over £50 million of debt. It was the Green-run council that provided £36 million of public money to pay for that vanity project, and in the end taxpayers in Brighton and Hove were left £51 million out of pocket and Brighton and Hove council were left to pay £2 million a year for the foreseeable future.

I do not think we need to take any lectures from the Green party about how to manage public money, because when they have been in power, they cannot do it. No wonder they want to pass responsibility over to a citizens’ jury rather than take responsibility themselves.

I have been diverted, but I think it was useful. Before I move on to my next point, I will take one more diversion.

**Neil Coyle:** It is not just the Green party in this country that causes such significant challenges. The demands of the Green party in Germany on the then-Government to stop using nuclear energy directly contributed to the reliance on Putin, and Germany is struggling as a result today. The Greens should not be trusted with any economy anywhere.

**Dame Meg Hillier:** Madam Deputy Speaker, I do not want to try your patience, so I will move on from the Green party, because the subject of the debate is the Water Bill that my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South has put forward.



I want to talk about the challenges that we are seeing in water. Nobody would argue that there is not a problem we are having to deal with. I take the example of my wonderful constituency of Hackney South and Shoreditch and the amazing resource that is the River Lea. It runs through my constituency, starting further up beyond London. We do not have the figures for 2024 yet, but in 2023 there were 1,060 instances of sewage discharge into the River Lea. That amounted to 11,502 hours of sewage discharge from storm overflows. If that is not bad enough, it is almost double the figure from 2022, when sewage was discharged into the River Lea for 5,891 hours. It has been getting worse. We have been raising this issue in the House, and in the last Parliament not enough happened to tackle it. Now, thank goodness, we have a Labour Government who are beginning to act and make sure that water companies are taken into account.

The water quality of the Lea has had a damning assessment: an overall classification of bad, failing on chemical standards and bad ecological health. It is a tragedy that we worked so hard to get our waterways cleaned up during the run-up to the 2012 Olympics, which was a major boost to east London, but we now have bad ecological health.

On a hot, sunny day on Hackney Marshes—sadly no longer in my constituency after the boundary changes—people can be seen swimming in the river, and that is not a place they should be swimming. It is one of the most polluted rivers in the country, but it should be a blue lung for east Londoners. We need to get this problem tackled.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** The hon. Member is making an important point about river pollution, and she is absolutely right. Would she agree that there is also a planning issue? There are too many paved spaces, and not enough run-off is available to go into the ground water. We need a holistic approach that includes much more assertive planning policies on drainage. Otherwise, we end up with sewage in our rivers during periods of heavy rainfall.

**Dame Meg Hillier:** I thank my right hon. Friend for that—I say “Friend” because the right hon. Gentleman and I served very effectively together in Islington when he was the MP and I was a junior councillor for eight years in his patch, so I know his passion in this area.

On run-offs, it is interesting that some councils are still behind on planning issues, so in some areas people are still allowed to pave over their front gardens, and in others they are expected to put in blocks for the tyres of vehicles, with drain-aways or soakaways around them. We need much more of that. I have been involved in that debate for 30 years, and the right hon. Gentleman has been involved for even longer—I bow to his experience—yet we still see challenges in the planning system not allowing for that. We await the full detail of the planning changes, but I really welcome the Government’s move to look at planning differently, ensuring that we are building this sort of resilience into our areas.

We have small areas of flood risk in my constituency, around the Lea valley, so we need to ensure, if it is appropriate to build homes there, that we manage that risk through some of these mitigations. That is very important, because what also happens is that rubbish is

washed down from the streets to the canal side—we have just talked about the River Lea—and many of my canal dwellers are concerned, as I am sure are the right hon. Gentleman’s, about the rubbish that has to be collected.

Research by Thames21 and University College London shows that the amount of faecal *E. coli* bacteria in the River Lea regularly exceeds international standards. It pains me to have to say this, because I love my constituency and think that part of my job is to big it up and tell everyone the great things about it, but sometimes we just have to call out the problems, unfortunately, and this is a real concern.

My constituency is served by Thames Water, of course. Thames Water discharged sewage into the Thames for more than 300,000 hours in 2024, but what is really shocking is that only four years earlier sewage was discharged for just under 19,000 hours—18,443 hours. We thought that was bad and it has exponentially increased, and there is 50% more sewage than in 2023 when sewage was discharged into the Thames for 196,000 hours. London is an international city; it is unbelievable that our river is so dirty and we need to get this resolved.

Nationally, none of our rivers is considered to be in good chemical health according to the Rivers Trust. That means every river in England contains chemicals that are known to cause harm, and figures published just yesterday by the Environment Agency revealed that untreated sewage, including human waste, wet wipes and condoms, was released into waterways for more than 3.62 million hours in 2024. In 2016—just eight years before that data—the comparable figure was 100,533 hours. We are seeing a really big deterioration, and that is why we need to act. I look forward to hearing from my hon. Friend the Minister about some of the actions the Government are taking to tackle this.

If sewage on its own is not a reason to look at how we tackle water, the problem of security of supply is a very big concern. I had the privilege of chairing the Public Accounts Committee for nine years, having also served on the Committee for longer, and in 2020 we found that there is a serious risk that the country will run out of water in the next 20 years. We were not a Committee that tended to use hyperbole; we were looking at the facts. We would build our reports on work by the National Audit Office, and we would question witnesses about it. The timescale for that risk was 20 years, so we are already five years into that programme. My hon. Friend the Minister and the Government face a great challenge to try and resolve this in such a short time, because 15 years is not as long as it seems when we are dealing with such big issues.

Security of supply is threatened by increasing demand and diminishing supply. Relevant factors of course include population growth in parts of the country, and urbanisation and development. The point of how we deal with this in planning has been raised and it is absolutely vital that water supply is built into new developments and the new towns the Government are proposing and all the housing developments that we hope to see.

Climate change has obviously been a factor as well, as is unsustainable abstraction when water is removed from the natural environment. I will not try your patience, Madam Deputy Speaker, but the issue of chalk streams in this country is a scandal, and once damaged they are

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gone forever. We have been raping our environment for water company profit and that has to stop. We have also seen growth in water-intensive industries such as data centres, which are causing issues for electricity but also for water, and we need a proper planning process for that. So a lot of this does come back to the Government's stance in taking a genuinely proactive approach, making sure that planning is not a blocker but actually helps deliver the solutions we need.

In 2022, the Government updated Ofwat's strategic policy statement to include an objective for the regulator to "increase resilience" in the long term. In 2024, the national infrastructure commission recommended that the Government and Ofwat ensure that water companies' plans were sufficient to increase water supplies to meet demand for an additional 4,800 megalitres per day by 2050. The numbers are all very well, but we know there is a big challenge now.

The Government will be publishing an updated national framework for water in the summer—I do not think my hon. Friend the Minister ever gets a holiday, with the amount of work that she has to do. Basically, we have water, but not in the places that we need it. We have not built a reservoir for decades. As a child of the 1976 drought—unbelievable, but true—I remember the impact that had on behaviour. In my case, we did not have standpipes in the street, but many families in this country had to go with a bottle to a standpipe in the street to get their water. Water is always a precious commodity, but we really learned that then. We were told not to leave the tap running when washing up or cleaning our teeth. I do not want to lecture people, but we should all keep to those habits. I learned those habits about water preservation at the age of seven—I will admit it—and they have never left me. That was a serious crisis in 1976, but here we are in 2025, facing many of the same challenges. I do not envy my hon. Friend the Minister for the challenges she is seeking to address.

The Government are acting. The Water (Special Measures) Act has been introduced and includes, quite properly, criminal liability for water executives. They cannot hide behind the corporate body and say it was someone else's fault; we have to have people stepping up. In over a decade on the Public Accounts Committee, I learned that failure is always an orphan. We used to call it "public accounts tennis". We would say, "Who was in charge? Who was responsible?" and people would all look at each other, waiting to see who would jump forward. Introducing criminal liability sounds draconian, and it is, but it is vital that those who are heading up operations of this importance, and being paid the pay that they are to deliver them, take real responsibility and ensure they have systems in place in their organisations. If the buck stops with them, they will take it very seriously. The criminal liability includes imprisonment for water executives when companies fail to co-operate or obstruct investigations.

The Act also introduces a bonus ban for chief executives and senior leaders unless high standards are met on protecting the environment, consumers and financial resilience. We can talk more about Thames Water in relation to that in a moment. It also introduces automatic penalties for environmental pollution. It ensures that pollution is being measured in real time, because during

the last Parliament it was discovered that, for all the talk about measuring sewage, it was not being measured in real time. A lot of the indicators were not there, so it was easy to dodge the real numbers that we are now seeing with the exponential increase in sewage discharge.

The Act introduces an independent water commission as a regulator, which I welcome. The commission was launched in October last year and is chaired by the former deputy governor of the Bank of England, Sir Jon Cunliffe. It is intended to deliver a reset to the sector and is expected to be the biggest review of the water industry since privatisation. I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South, who introduced the Bill today, that the commission will be the platform for discussions about the future. Tempting as it may be for him to want to get his Bill passed today, it would not deliver in the timeframe that he would want it to, as that would take a while. Let us take a measured stand and look closely at the independent commission—as I have warned my hon. Friend the Minister, I will be watching it very closely and asking questions about it—because we need to see that overview from every angle. Sir Jon Cunliffe is an independent individual who will be very tough with the Government on this issue.

**Chris Hinchliff** (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): My hon. Friend has criticised the proposal for citizens' assemblies, saying that we should have the confidence to make political judgments in this House for the future of our water companies. Will she explain why she supports having an independent water commission but does not support the proposal for citizens' assemblies?

**Dame Meg Hillier:** I will not repeat all of the issues about people's attendance at a citizens' assembly—the difficulty of achieving it and of people coming to it. I am not sure whether Sir Jon Cunliffe is being paid to do the job—quite often people are not—but he has been given time to devote to it, and also has access to a lot of technical expertise and data. I have spent more than a decade looking at these sorts of reviews and how they collect information. They have powers to receive that information and the expertise to analyse it. I have had the privilege of working with the National Audit Office for a long period of time, and I know the level of expertise that goes into analysing that information, which is quite intense and immense, especially when we are dealing with money, infrastructure and water.

**Clive Lewis:** Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Dame Meg Hillier:** I will give way one final time.

**Clive Lewis:** I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, and I will be very brief. There is a crisis of democracy, and as my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Chris Hinchliff) has just mentioned, we are rejecting a citizens' assembly. Such an assembly could have the technical support and technical capacity as well, but it would give a voice to the public. Instead, we have decided to give that voice to Sir Jon Cunliffe, a lifelong Treasury insider who works in the City of London and who will make a decision based on its interests. Can she not see the problem here, and the lack of confidence the public have in the democratic decisions that are being taken by people like that?

**Dame Meg Hillier:** My hon. Friend is being particularly personal about Sir Jon Cunliffe. I have to say that I have not met him, but the point is that he will not be making the decisions; they will go to Ministers.

I am aware that time is marching on, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I would like to say briefly that there are six key areas in which the commission is seeking views. That is the point—it is not just Sir Jon Cunliffe. I will rattle through those key areas and then sit down. They are the strategic management of water; the overarching regulatory system; economic regulation; environmental and drinking water regulation; water company ownership models; and asset health and supply chains. Each of those areas contains a degree of technical challenge. Any of us, and any of our constituents—I hope we are all asking our constituents to contribute to this process—can put in, but there will be a lot of technical experts in those areas that will also need to provide input. Sir Jon Cunliffe will then have to put that to Ministers.

Another point is that Ministers do not have to accept what Sir Jon says, but if they want to go into any of it in more detail, my hon. Friend the Minister would presumably have the power—of course she has the power; she is the Minister—to seek further information. I am aware that when commissions are set up badly, they can be a problem for Government, but this is a very thorough approach, which is the right approach after all these years of privatisation and the recent extensive challenges, particularly with sewage discharges.

It is easy to think that we can just rush in and sort this out, but we need to do it in a measured way. I am always impatient—we all get elected to make change tomorrow—but I have looked at failed projects for over a decade. If we rush in and do not plan right, we spend more money and it often results in failure. I could list those projects, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I will try your patience no further.

11.12 am

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Ind): I compliment my good friend the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) on his passion, commitment, knowledge and determination. If I may say so, I am also grateful that he mentioned the late, great David Graeber in his introduction. He was a good friend to both of us, an amazing young man and an amazing philosopher sadly taken from us too soon. I think his family will be really chuffed that the hon. Member has included him in his speech on something so fundamental as the right to fresh, clean water for us all. This Bill seeks to protect that right; it recognises that water is an essential and basic need, and therefore something so universal and so essential surely ought to be completely in public hands. Most countries around the world do not even countenance the idea of privatising water; they say, “It is our public responsibility to ensure that we can provide clean and safe water for everybody.”

When the Government of Margaret Thatcher and others privatised water in the 1980s, many of us strongly opposed it—I think I am the only Member in the Chamber who had the privilege of voting against privatisation at the time. We predicted that it would lead to a rip-off of the public sector, and to asset stripping of the land and other resources that the water boards had built up. We also pointed out that the water infrastructure we enjoy—the

reservoirs in Wales, in Scotland and all over England, the piping, the sewage works, and all the other hugely complex elements of infrastructure—was, for the most part, built by public enterprise and public investment. We all laud the work of Bazalgette in producing a sewage system for London. That was not done by the private sector; it was done through Victorian investment in a public structure to bring about proper treatment of sewage and provide clean water for the people of London. We should be proud of the public investment that brought about the water system that we have, and should recognise that since 1989, when water was privatised, £72 billion has been taken out in dividends by the water companies. That amounts to £2 billion a year not invested in water—not invested in new pipes and in protecting the system we have. Those profits are extraordinary.

The hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) rightly talked about the amount of pollution flowing into our rivers. I cannot get my head around the fact that 300,000 hours-worth of sewage was pumped into the Thames in the last year alone. When we add that to the amount being pumped into the Severn, the Trent, the Humber, the Mersey and all the great rivers across this country, we realise the scale of the problem we are dealing with. We then realise what happens to that—the sewage goes into the sea, and it comes back in fish. It pollutes water, which does not stop at the river’s mouth; it goes into the oceans, creating further global water pollution.

Surely we can do much better. I therefore welcome the Bill, and I invite Members to look seriously at clauses 1 and 2. Clause 1 sets out the measures that will be required in the Secretary of State’s strategy, including measures on prioritising investment, collaborating with local authorities and using natural flood management techniques, and a requirement for local authorities to take into account the need for conservation—all incredibly sensible measures that can only be delivered by public authorities. Privatised water companies do not have as their top line the conservation of the natural world and the environment. They have as their top line, their middle line and their bottom line the profits they can take out of it. And please, nobody tell me that the £72 billion paid out in dividends has been reinvested in the British economy. It is in tax havens all over the world. We are subsidising tax havens all over the world on the back of our polluted and privatised water industry.

Clause 2 relates to the commission on water, which is a fascinating proposal. The commission would include representatives of water companies—which are privatised at the moment but would hopefully be publicly owned—union representatives in the water industry, environmental or conservation groups, water users, which would be local businesses, and local authorities. I strongly support public ownership of water, but I do not envisage a situation in which the Prime Minister, as a gift to his friends, puts them all on a British water board. I would like to retain the existing system of managing river basin areas—Thames, Severn Trent and so on. That makes sense, because that is where the primary water supply comes from. That would be managed through a commission that includes the workforce, trade unions, all the local authorities in the area, local businesses, because they use water and supply services locally, and



[*Jeremy Corbyn*]

others who can be appointed from elsewhere. We would have public buy-in to the structure, which would give us a much better and more democratic system.

I urge Members to look with some imagination at what the hon. Member for Norwich South has put forward. Some say, “We can’t possibly bring this into public ownership because it might cost money.” The 1945 Labour Government started by nationalising the Bank of England in 1946 and went on to bring many other industries into public ownership. Even the Ted Heath Government in 1971 brought Rolls-Royce into public ownership and created Rolls-Royce (1971) Ltd because the company was failing. The agreed share price was set by Parliament—it was not set by the market in all those cases. We can do the same in this case.

**Mr Frith:** The right hon. Gentleman and I stood for election in 2019 on a manifesto of public ownership of the utilities and water companies. It cost me my job, and the public decided to give Labour the worst electoral thumping in our history. Will he take some responsibility for that? Does he reflect on the point that what he is advocating has already been rejected by this country?

**Jeremy Corbyn:** I thank the hon. Member for that incredibly friendly and helpful intervention. I am most grateful to him for the collegiate way in which he put that; I could not put it better myself. That manifesto included public ownership of water and other services because those industries needed to come into public ownership; they were failing. The policies in that manifesto were all well in the plus category—more than 70% supported public ownership of water. This might be uncomfortable for him, but the Labour party actually received more votes publicly and nationally in 2019 than it did in the recent general election. We have an electoral system that is unbelievably unfair, and which brought about an enormous majority on a very low total vote. We can all play with the numbers.

I do not resile from what was in that manifesto, because it was put there by people who worked in the industry. The GMB and other unions took part in the consultation that brought about that policy on water. I urge the hon. Member to consider the Bill put forward by my friend the hon. Member for Norwich South, and to recognise that it is an opportunity to do something different.

There has been a lot of to-ing and fro-ing about having a commission, or a citizens’ assembly. Why is everybody so scared of a citizens’ assembly? What is the big problem with it? Is it something in Members’ heads? What is going on? Why would anyone be so worried about it? Citizens get together and put forward a proposal. We do not have to agree it or accept it, and it does not take away the powers of Parliament. It gives an opportunity for randomly selected ordinary citizens to put forward a point of view. That was done a lot in Scotland when we were talking about devolution. It has been done in other places; in Chile, it was done to develop a new constitution, some of which was ultimately rejected in a referendum. Do these assemblies take away from or diminish the principles discussed? No. I believe they do the very opposite.

**Mark Ferguson:** I have not yet heard a response from anyone in this House to my legitimate concern about regional variation if there is no ability to compel. The right hon. Gentleman is a Member for Islington in London, where a lot of meetings like this one are held. I am a Member for Gateshead, 250 miles away. Attending an assembly would require a lot of travel. How does he suggest we deal with the lack of compulsion, and the regional variation in involvement in citizens’ assemblies?

**Jeremy Corbyn:** Since the hon. Member used to live in Islington, he is well aware of how great the connectivity to the area is. Obviously, we live in a country where the capital, London, is in the south-east. That is maybe not an ideal geographical location, but I do not think it is going to change any time soon. If we have a national commission, it has to meet somewhere—it does not have to be in London. Do we have to pay the cost of getting people to the meetings? Yes, of course, obviously we do. I envisage a more localised form of consultation in regional water areas, such as Severn Trent, Humber and so on. I think that would meet the concerns that the hon. Gentleman legitimately raises about the overly centric nature of our political structures in this country.

**Tristan Osborne** (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): Is there not an inherent contradiction here? I am not against the principle of citizens’ assemblies; my concern is the idea that they need to be formed by Parliament. Secondly, does the right hon. Gentleman not see an inconsistency between a party that has a mandate for delivering nationalisation, and handing these matters over to a citizens’ assembly for deliberation? Does he not see that there is an inherent contradiction between the two?

**Jeremy Corbyn:** I do not think there is a contradiction at all. I think it is mature, grown-up politics to say, “We have the objective of public ownership. We want you to consider what the best form and structure of it would be.” It could be that people do not agree with it at all; we would then have to discuss and debate the matter with them. Obviously, ultimately Parliament has to make the decision. I know everyone in the House is brilliant; the intellect is superb, and the knowledge amazing, and they are infallible in all their judgments, but is it just possible that there are some people who are not Members of Parliament who also have enormous knowledge, experience and ability? Perhaps we should listen to them, too.

**Neil Coyle** *rose*—

**Jeremy Corbyn:** I will give way for the last time.

**Neil Coyle:** How long, roughly, does the right hon. Gentleman think it would take to ensure that the citizens were skilled up enough to contribute effectively to the full consultation that he is talking about? As he was so precious about the intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Frith), I will do him a favour by pointing out that the Bill requires the commission to report within four months.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** Some people would not require any training or skills development at all; others might, and of course a short period would be needed for that. This



is more a question for the promoter of the Bill. If the hon. Member for Norwich South wishes to intervene, I would be happy to give way on this point.

**Clive Lewis:** May I make a more general point? If the Bill went into Committee, we would look at this in far more detail, but a big part of the Bill is about a mission and our direction of travel. It is about tackling the crisis in democracy, and trusting our fellow citizens to give a point of view, with guidance from experts, so that we can make a decision. When the founders of the renaissance or capitalism sat down, did they know that the renaissance would happen, or that capitalism would end up like this? No. This is about heading in a certain direction and having some imagination—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Order. Interventions should be short.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** I thank the hon. Member for Norwich South for that helpful reply to the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle). I am just doing my best to facilitate debate here, and I hope that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, will appreciate the congenial atmosphere that I am trying to create. I do not know whether it is working; please let me know later.

**Mark Garnier:** It is working for us.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** Well, there you go. Thank you very much indeed.

I will finish with a couple of points. This country now suffers serious flooding almost every year. We have all experienced the pain that our constituents and others face as a result. Part, but not all, of that is brought about by unusual weather patterns and excessive rainfall. We also need to think seriously about natural river management and natural flood prevention; that is specified in the Bill, and is important. The city of York, for example, is at a confluence of rivers. It has always been in danger of flooding, because it has these rivers flowing into it. There could be a combination of solutions. One is, yes, flood defence walls, concrete barriers and so on to protect central York from flooding. However, there is also the management of what happens upstream.

If we deforest further upstream, build on floodplains and prevent the river following its natural course, we end up with flooding. There are lots of small-scale natural defences one can have against flooding, such as not building on floodplains, having rivers meandering rather than flowing in straight lines, and letting beavers build their dams on streams and so on. There are a whole lot of solutions, all of which add up to something valuable and good. That will not be thought about by water companies; it is done with imagination. Farmers in Shropshire are promoting exactly that kind of solution. Likewise, what happened with the River Parrett, which had excessive flooding, has partly been resolved—but not completely—by the Environment Agency recreating peat bogs up in the hills. There are a lot of things that we can do, but they require imagination. A water company, whose sole interest is in making money out of the water industry, will not be interested in that. That is why the public must have a voice in this process, and that is what the Bill ensures.

The levels of pollution are truly shocking—the sewage that flows in and the danger to all of us. The water we drink is not pure and it is not clean, because there is a limit to how much scrubbing of water can be done to make it clean. We end up drinking all kinds of foul things in our water, not to mention the microplastics that exist because of the excessive use of plastic water bottles as people do not trust the water supply. It breaks my heart. Every day I walk up Seven Sisters Road and outside every shop is a great stack of plastic bottles of water, because people do not trust the water. Would it not be nice if we totally trusted our water and did not feel the need endlessly to buy plastic bottles of water to keep us going through the day?

Last Saturday, I took part in a local people's forum in my constituency. We invited people to come to discuss water and the water supply. The hall was completely full and the forum was also followed online by a number of other people. We had two excellent speakers: Johnbosco Nwogbo from We Own It, and Laura Reineke from Friends of the Thames. They both spoke with passion, knowledge and interest. We then threw open the discussion for questions and asked each table to come up with their ideas. The commonality was: clean water; ownership and control; the cost of water; and anger and irritation at Thames Water's lack of investment in the pipe network, including the lack of re-sleeving of the Victorian mains in so many places.

We have had major floods on Isledon Road, Stroud Green Road, Holloway Road and Seven Sisters Road in the recent past, not to mention one in the constituency of Hackney North and Stoke Newington—not the constituency of the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier), who has been speaking today—which flooded into our area. The Sobell leisure centre, near where I live, was flooded out. It is now two and a half years later and the restitution works for the damage done are just being completed. That is the irresponsibility of Thames Water not investing in the network, wasting money in the short term by digging up short sections of road, replacing the pipe, filling it in again and coming back the next month to dig up another bit of road 100 metres away to do exactly the same thing. We need a much more coherent and comprehensive approach.

The Bill put forward by the hon. Member for Norwich South gives us the chance to do something better and do something different: to make our water a public asset and a public resource; and to take it away from those who have done so much damage to it. Instead, let us do something better and say that we are going to provide all the people of this country with good quality clean water. We will stop polluting our rivers and seas, and we will have river basin management to ensure that flooding, if not ended—we are not going to end it completely—will at least be under control through natural as well as other means. Let us end the waste and start investing in a sustainable future for all of us. That is what the Bill does.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** A lot of Members want to contribute today. I call James Frith.

11.32 am

**Mr James Frith** (Bury North) (Lab): I first want to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) on the Bill and on his passionate speech. No one can be in any doubt about his commitment to this cause. I was struck by the elegance of his comments in his wind-up, which drew on his time serving in Afghanistan. I thank him for his service in Afghanistan; such service is frequently overlooked in this House. It was a very powerful moment in his speech when he combined his service with the argument he was making, and I congratulate him on that.

I welcome the opportunity to speak in this important and timely debate. Yesterday, we learnt of the 3.6 million hours of pollutant discharged into our waterways. The conditions of our rivers and seas, and the system that governs them, demand our national attention. There has been conversation about a lack of imagination, but our record in government is that we have already begun to grasp the challenges we have all described and understand. We are all overwhelmed by the contact made by our constituents on this issue and on the quality of water. A distant, arm's length system has left us knee deep in pollution and the water companies are up to their necks in it. We need to continue with the mandate given to us at the general election to tackle this issue.

The issue is not just about pollution either; it is symptomatic of the crisis-mode, emergency nature of our public services that even getting attention on to flooding or river dredging or even accessing basic expertise feels like a game of cat and mouse when it comes to these organisations. Whether it is the Environment Agency ducking meetings in Bury North, or United Utilities or different utilities branches in respective areas, it is eternally frustrating and disappointing how lacking in accountability some of the organisations prove to be. There is politics and power in being a good customer service organisation; it is not just about an accountable constituency MP turning up and the company taking on board concerns. Even when a local MP writes to these organisations, we can receive short shrift or the organisation can fail to respond to the issues at hand. We need to bear down on the organisations and get the best for our people.

The mentality of accountability is decidedly missing from so many of our public service providers. We need to re-instil a sense that they are accountable to us—that we determine the nature of their work and the outcomes that we expect from them. Of course they are stretched and under pressure—we have all rehearsed the inheritance that the Labour Government have received—but too often there is a culture of avoidance, of obfuscation and, frankly, of ducking responsibilities. Nowhere is that more apparent than in a sector charged with safeguarding the very essence of life itself: water.

The issue is not abstract but a lived experience in communities such as mine. In Bury North, we know all too well the consequences of failure. The River Irwell, which flows from Ramsbottom to Radcliffe, was the most dumped in river in England last year. In 2023 alone, United Utilities was responsible for a staggering 11,974 sewage spills into the Irwell—an average of 32 every single day. That is not just staggering but shameful. The state we are in is barely fathomable. The issue is also personal—it is environmental and affects our families.

I have walked those river banks in Ramsbottom, through Burrs, with my children. I have warned them not to go near the water for a variety of reasons, which now also includes the pollutant level. I have spent many a sunny afternoon warning them to stay away from the water or encouraging other people's families to exercise due care because of what lies beneath. The pollution of that river is a blight on our community and a direct threat to our health and wellbeing. It is not just a statistic but a national scandal—another day, another national scandal. It is barely believable that the situation should have been allowed to get this far.

**Mark Ferguson:** Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the under-recognised aspects of sewage and pollution is their huge impact on the tourism industry and our ability to attract people to this country so that they spend their money here?

**Mr Frith:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right—that is an important observation. The town is doing its utmost to make Burrs, the country park I have been referring to, into a jewel, a place to visit and a destination to come to, but we have very little say in the quality of the water that runs through it.

I will engage with the proposals made by my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South and the aim to clean our rivers, strengthen environmental protections and ensure better oversight, but I believe that the Government are well under way with that focus. I remain focused on communities such as mine and what they need now—urgent, decisive action. I look forward to the Minister's comments on what comes next and what we have already achieved. That has included the banning of bosses' bonuses and of mega-payouts after decades of under-investment.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** I agree with what the hon. Member is saying about levels of pollution. Does he really think that United Utilities is a fit and proper organisation to carry on supplying water? Does he not think that somebody else should be doing it—like us?

**Mr Frith:** I would not suggest that either the right hon. Gentleman or I should be in charge of the water in my constituency.

We need severe and automatic fines for illegal sewage discharges. There has been real-time monitoring by campaigners, as well as formal observations—I have referred to yesterday's updates. We need criminal charges for water company executives who have overseen law breaking, and stricter environmental and consumer standards.

None of this should divide us, but our focus should be the ends, not the means. To bring failing companies to heel requires a degree of imagination, and we need to put public service first. To simply say that we should have public ownership of everything, without asking who pays and who takes the debt thereafter, does not require imagination. It is a failure to answer the challenge and the question.

**Carla Denyer:** The hon. Member has expressed concern about how public ownership would be paid for. Is he aware of the special administration regime for water companies? It was brought in last year and would substantially address these issues.

**Mr Frith:** I am aware of the special arrangements that have historically been provided for many of our formerly nationalised utility organisations, but the clue is in the term “special”. Public ownership should not be the go-to; it is done only under extraordinary circumstances. The hon. Lady and I do not agree on that.

I want to recognise those who have worked so hard to raise the alarm—campaigners such as Feargal Sharkey and Labour’s own environmental champions, as well as Bury’s anglers, including Eric Owen and his team. Feargal and the campaigners joined me in Ramsbottom last year to stand with local residents and shine a light on the scale of this crisis. Feargal has been a passionate and vocal advocate for clean water, and has not hesitated to call out the water companies and call for their accountability. His support speaks volumes about the urgency and importance of this fight.

However we shape the future of water governance—whether through regulation, strategic oversight or questions of ownership—it is vital that we never lose sight of the people and places affected by it. This is not an abstract issue. It is about families in Ramsbottom and Radcliffe. It is about children being told not to play by the river. It is about the wildlife that no longer thrives. It is about the basic right to clean water and a functioning, fair system that protects it. To that end, will the Minister join my effort to register parts of the River Irwell in Bury North as an area of outstanding natural beauty, so that we might secure the protections it needs and the deeper attention that the issue of pollution deserves?

We must act, and we are acting. Let us continue to do so. I look forward to the Minister’s comments on what comes next in light of today’s debate. We owe it to our communities, our children and the generations that follow to end this sewage scandal and deliver the cleaner, safer future that they deserve.

11.43 am

**Ellie Chowns** (North Herefordshire) (Green): I am delighted that we are having this debate in the House today. Clean water is a subject that is very close to my heart as the representative for North Herefordshire, and to the hearts of my constituents, because the condition of the River Lugg, the River Wye and their tributaries has caused terrible damage to the local ecology and, indeed, to the local economy. I draw the House’s attention to my role as co-chair of the all-party group on water pollution, which I established.

These issues are crucial. I will start by reflecting on the debate we have had thus far, and then go on to make three points. One hon. Member said that we should not do anything in a rush, but it is clear that nothing in this Bill would be done in a rush. The Bill sets out a considered approach to tackling a very complex issue, and there has been some debate today about the potential to use citizens’ assemblies as one component in addressing it. I regret to say that some of the comments and interventions have perhaps been rooted in a misunderstanding of, or a lack of engagement with, the concept of citizens’ assemblies. For example, the citizens’ assembly to which I have referred, which was set up jointly by six Select Committees of this House, was held in Birmingham, not London, and partly online. Travel expenses and participation expenses were paid. Full attention is paid to participation.

**Mark Ferguson:** Birmingham is, in fact, far more difficult than London to get to from my constituency. I do not believe it is about the specific geographic place; it is about how we get people together from all corners of the country, to make sure we have a regional spread.

**Ellie Chowns:** I warmly invite the hon. Member to read up about how citizens’ assemblies work, how the sampling works and how participation is facilitated for all people, and about the time commitment. The citizens’ assembly previously established by this House was over three weekends in Birmingham. These are not huge commitments, but they are a valuable mechanism for ensuring that the public have the time to consider an issue in depth.

I want to raise three points on this important Bill. First, I could not agree more with the hon. Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) that the privatisation of water has been an absolute disaster. We have seen soaring bills, soaring executive pay, soaring dividends and soaring siphoning of finance out of our country into the pockets of private interests, while at the same time our infrastructure has crumbled and our rivers have become increasingly polluted. It is long past time to resolve this national disgrace.

My Green colleagues and I believe that public ownership is a core part of the solution, but it is not the only solution. We have to ensure that the water system is adequately regulated, so that whoever is in charge sticks to the rules, does not make profits on the back of pollution and does not pump sewage into our rivers—that is fundamental and essential.

**Dame Meg Hillier:** How does the hon. Lady propose to pay them for running the water system? We all agree there are problems, but in the current climate, where would she get the money from to pay for this to happen?

**Ellie Chowns:** I refer the hon. Lady to my previous comments on the merits of citizens’ assemblies in considering the details over many dozens of hours. I also refer to my party’s manifesto.

Secondly, climate change is a systemic challenge. I am glad that some hon. Members have mentioned this and that it is included in the text of the Bill because, as the hon. Member for Norwich South said, it is a huge problem when there is too little water. Too much water is also a huge problem, and that problem is increasing.

I have already spoken several times in this House about flooding in my constituency. Climate change is making these challenges more frequent and more severe, so any Water Bill needs to address not only the water industry, water supply and sewage, but also climate change and its interactions with water. I am pleased that is mentioned in the Bill.

Another topic mentioned by the Bill, somewhat briefly, is perhaps even closer to my heart—and certainly close to my constituency. Indeed, as I put my hand to my heart, I feel the jewellery I am wearing, which represents the River Wye. Pollution is the elephant in the room in how this issue is currently being tackled. Pollution comes not only from sewage but from agricultural run-off. Nearly three quarters of the pollution in my constituency is from agricultural run-off. There has been a planning moratorium across almost all of my constituency for more than five years, with devastating economic effects.



[*Ellie Chowns*]

Tackling the water industry will not address this. Indeed, the majority of my constituency is served by the only non-profit water company in the UK.

The problem we face is around pollution. I find it disappointing, even distressing, that although the conversation about water in this House has rightly focused on sewage, it has not focused sufficiently on tackling water pollution. As DEFRA figures and the Environmental Audit Committee's report both show, half of the problem is from agricultural water pollution. Slightly more of our waterways are in bad condition because of agricultural pollution rather than sewage pollution. This is an issue that we need to tackle together, working in concert with farmers.

We need to support farmers, which is why I am so devastated by the direction in recent months, which has arguably been wrong. I am particularly upset that just a couple of weeks ago, the sustainable farming incentive was taken away from farmers without anything to replace it. We need a Government who work with farmers and support them to transition to nature-friendly farming, so that we can reduce the agricultural run-off that has such a devastating effect on our waterways.

The Government have this vital role to play in leadership. It is essential to tackle the failures of the privatised water industry, essential to tackle the outrageous volume of sewage overflows into our rivers and essential to tackle agricultural water pollution.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** Could I take the hon. Member back to the question of farming pollution? Does she feel that the problem is too many pesticides being used in farming, too large fields, or an inability to restore the natural drainage systems, such as ditches, which lead to water going into groundwater, rather than rushing down and filling and polluting our rivers?

**Ellie Chowns:** I hope the right hon. Member would agree that it is a multifaceted problem, and that there are different issues in different places. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. In my constituency, the issue is particularly about phosphate pollution, but in other places it is about nitrates, and in other places it is about water volume. I absolutely agree with his earlier comments on the importance of upland water management and natural flood management approaches, which are ways to ensure that we manage water, keep water on the land and address questions of drainage. Indeed, I mentioned this in a debate on the Planning and Infrastructure Bill just the other day, because it is vital that the Bill addresses the question of water management.

We need to treat these things in an integrated and site-specific way. I have called for many years now for a water protection zone in my constituency to ensure that the sources of pollution are correctly attributed and tackled, and have called for more funding and teeth for the Environment Agency to enforce the existing rules, which will help to reduce the problem of pollution.

To conclude, I warmly welcome the Bill brought to the House today by the hon. Member for Norwich South, which presents a thoughtful, constructive and detailed way of bringing people together to address what we all recognise is a crucial problem. However, I say to him—and to the Minister—that we must tackle

agricultural water pollution with the same sense of urgency and commitment with which we are addressing sewage. Sir Jon Cunliffe's Independent Water Commission explicitly excluded this issue from its terms of reference, except in so far as it relates to the water industry. I have read the water commission's terms of reference very carefully, and have spoken to the commission about it: it is not set up to address the problem of agricultural run-off into our rivers. We need the same level of focus on this issue as we do on sewage, because if we want to clean up our rivers, lakes and seas, we need an integrated approach.

11.53 am

**Sojan Joseph (Ashford) (Lab):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) on his success in the private Member's Bill ballot and on bringing forward this Bill, which deals with such an important topic. He deserves great credit for continuing the national debate on the quality of our waterways.

I know from the many emails I have received since my election in July that my constituents in Ashford, Hawkinge and the villages are angry about the state of our waterways, and they have every right to be angry: the latest figures for my constituency show that the waterways that were polluted by sewage 1,127 times in 2023. This was allowed to happen as a result of 14 years of mismanagement and weakened regulation of the water industry by the Conservatives.

The polluting of our local waterways has a real-world impact: it risks damaging our ecosystems and having an impact on people's health. Not long after I was elected, I was contacted by a primary school in my constituency. At the end of the summer term, the school had a lovely tradition of taking some of its children to paddle in the Great Stour, which runs near the school. However, the school contacted me to say that when it took children to the river at the end of last year, 25% of those who had splashed and paddled were ill within 24 hours.

I will give another example. A constituent who regularly swims in the channel off the coast of the constituency of my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Tony Vaughan) contacted me to express his deep concern about the amount of sewage that was allowed to be pumped into the sea from the combined sewer overflow. Those are just two examples of how pollution has been permitted in our waterways. This unacceptable and unforgivable destruction of our waterways should never have been allowed to happen, but that is exactly what the Conservatives did when they were in power.

Many of my constituents contacted me in advance of the Bill's Second Reading to let me know how important water quality is to them. Water is a resource that we all rely on, and they rightly feel that the system is failing them, with polluted waterways, declining service standards and increasing bills. Water companies are failing to deliver for their customers and the environment, and the public have rightly had enough. I welcome how, since my hon. Friend the Minister and colleagues entered office, they have taken immediate measures to address the failures of the last 14 years, including ensuring that funding for vital infrastructure investment is ringfenced. I was pleased to see that compensation for households and businesses will be doubled when basic water services are affected.



I was proud to support the Water (Special Measures) Bill, and I was delighted to see it receive Royal Assent last month and pass into law. The strengthening of the enforcement regime is an important sign to the water industry that things have changed under this Labour Government and that Labour Members will not tolerate the poor standards of the last 14 years. I want to see a fundamental transformation of our water industry. I also want the waterways in Ashford, Hawkinge and the villages, as well as the rest of the country, to be cleaned up and restored to good health.

I will not, however, support my hon. Friend's Bill, as the measures that he proposes go too far. I do not think it is the right time for them. This is an important issue, and we need to talk about it, but I am not convinced that bringing water services into public ownership would guarantee better services.

We have heard, seen and experienced that in our NHS. What happened there? We brought in NHS England to fix the problems and now, 14 years later, we are getting rid of NHS England. We have heard hon. Members talk about standards in our schools and the standard of our roads. Is it the right time for the measures in the Bill, or is it time to take responsibility and undertake the action that Labour came into government for? In eight months, we have moved fast and taken strong actions. Should we not give those new Acts time to come into effect and see if things get better?

**Clive Lewis:** For how long does my hon. Friend think we should polish the turd—we can probably find that floating in most of our rivers—of privatised English water?

**Sojan Joseph:** I would like to see things get better immediately. We cannot carry on as we have any longer, but what guarantee is there that by taking water into the public sector, the public's water bills will come down and they will get the service they expect?

We see problems in our public sector. For example, the NHS does not have the workforce to do the job, and we have seen waiting lists go up. Can we wait for two days before getting the water supply back in our houses if we do not have enough people to do the job? Is this the right time for the changes in the Bill, or should we give time for the actions we have taken already to come into effect and see if things get better? That is why now is not the right time to do this, but we need to talk about it because it is an important subject. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South on introducing the Bill, but we should continue talking about and monitoring this, as it is the only way to move forward.

12 noon

**Amanda Hack** (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) for bringing forward this important Bill. I enjoyed his passionate—although a little loud—speech. He is right that the public want better, and I think the actions that we have taken in government show that we want better too.

In recent months there have been so many discussions in the Chamber, Westminster Hall and the other place on how we can fix the broken water industry that the

Tories left behind. We have passed a Bill and set up a commission—clear action from this Government. These crucial debates together are ensuring that my constituents get the justice and representation they deserve after the Tories failed communities like mine for 14 years, and not just in the water sector but in so many public services. Sadly, they turned a blind eye to record levels of illegal sewage dumping, cut the Environment Agency budget in half since 2010, and allowed customer money to be spent irresponsibly on director bonuses and shareholder payouts.

The Conservatives avoided so many opportunities to hold the water companies to account, and they failed to regulate to protect our waterways, even after a shocking incident in September 2022 in my constituency. On 12 September, the Environment Agency received reports of a sewage discharge. Contractors arrived at Brooks Lane pumping station the same day to stop the problem, but officers discovered that 1 km of West Meadow Brook near Whitwick had been polluted. The investigation found the sewage discharge had been going on for weeks completely unchecked. There was an overwhelming odour, with a thick coating of sewage fungus covering the riverbed. Human faecal matter was also visible.

Severn Trent Water admitted that its teams had failed to see that the pumps had latched out and were not activated. It also accepted that it had failed to monitor effectively. The damage was so severe that the company took the offer of an enforcement undertaking, giving Trent Rivers Trust £600,000 to support the restoration of the habitat and environmental improvements.

In the same year, 2022, Sir Chris Whitty, the chief medical officer, outlined the serious health risks that sewage spills can pose for those using the country's waterways. The Tories did not heed his warnings and nothing was ever done. Even after this disgusting incident, sewage still poured into waterways in North West Leicestershire: 15,000 hours in 2023—15,000 hours!—and close along to the pumping station there are a number of storm outflows, which continue to release untreated effluent whenever they fancy. I have visited residents and walked with them across several sections where spills take place. It is disgusting, because even when the sewage is no longer being spilled the residual smell lingers and the visible debris continues. Severn Trent does clearance work, but never enough.

As a Leicestershire MP, I also have to mention flooding. We have had so many residents who have been impacted by flooding in our county, not just once, but many, many times, and, sadly, now are never going to be able to return to their homes, such is the impact of flooding in my community. There is no doubt in my mind that if the Tories were still in government, we still would have had no action to address these issues. They would still be taking none of the action needed to clean up our rivers and seas, and there would be no cracking down on the water executives.

**Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): I have not intervened on other speeches, but on that one comment that the hon. Lady has made, has she read the plan for water that was published by the previous Government and is she aware of its contents, which include £56 billion of investment to deal with exactly this issue?

**Amanda Hack:** I served on the Water (Special Measures) Bill Committee and obviously did my research on that. However, nothing changed: so we had a plan, but what we need is action, and that is the most important part of the approach we need to take.

Bonuses have still been paid to executives. Since 2020 they have rewarded themselves £41 million in bonuses, benefits and incentives—the price of failure was literally rewarded. I know how important tackling the behaviour of the water companies is locally. Water issues are constant in my casework, including flooding, sewage and water management. In a meeting with Severn Trent Water in January, one of my constituents was so furious at the lack of action, after months of issues and several meetings trying to get Severn Trent to deal with them, that she brought a bag of sewage with her and dumped it on the table on front of the executives.

When water companies are responding to emails or calls from residents, too often they forget how stomach-churningly detestable the issues really are, which proves how out of touch they really are. Going forward, we know that accountability is crucial, but communication with residents is equally important and they cannot be left behind. I encourage every one of my constituents who experiences problems with sewage outflows, flooding or poor standards of customer service to continue to get in touch with me. There is simply no excuse for the way in which some of my constituents have been treated, and I am certain that many other hon. Members will have constituents with similar stories.

Having served on the Water (Special Measures) Bill Committee, it was clear to me that that Act is a first step in a line of measures to hold the water bosses to account. The Act will ban bonuses for polluting water bosses. News reports in the last day about the record levels of sewage discharges will mean that no boss should get any bonus this year. The Act will enable criminal charges against law breakers, meaning examples like the one I gave earlier may have resulted in a criminal charge. It will force water companies to cover the cost of the enforcement action and pay for the damage that they do to our communities.

We have to go further, and we will. Sir Jon Cunliffe's current review of the water sector is open for evidence. He has said

“that the prize here is significant—cleaner waters, growth and a stable, well-funded sector”.

His passion for change is clear and matches the current Government's ambition to clean up our filthy waterways. I am sure that all hon. Members in the Chamber, especially those on the Labour Benches, are 100% committed to taking the actions necessary to fix our foundations, because that is what our constituents, our country and our environment deserve. My constituents voted for change, and I will ensure that they continue to get it.

12.7 pm

**Liam Conlon** (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) for introducing the Bill. I know that my constituents in Beckenham and Penge will want to thank him for raising the issues addressed in the debate today.

I will begin by talking about the recent five-day water ordeal that my constituents were subjected to by Thames Water. On the evening of Tuesday 11 February, a mains

water pipe burst up the road from me, in Dulwich, south London. Overnight, thousands of homes, hundreds of businesses, 11 care homes and 29 schools all lost access to their water. Six London postcodes were affected in all, including two in my constituency. The next day, residents in Anerley, Crystal Palace and Penge, in my constituency, woke up without any water. In response, Thames Water established a bottled water centre at the Sainsbury's in Bell Green. For those unfamiliar with the geography of south-east London, while it is located in a lovely part of the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby), ironically adjacent to the River Pool and the Waterlink Way, it is also up to an hour's walk away for some of the people in my constituency who were left without water. It was an unacceptable solution that could easily have been avoided.

Later that evening, Thames Water managed to make things even worse. The sole water bottle station was closed due to a security incident, leaving residents reliant on local supermarket stocks. Unsurprisingly, those ran dry pretty quickly. While the water bottle station later reopened, despite my offer of support and the offer of support from other hon. Members, Thames Water refused to open an alternative site closer to the outage. Some constituents still did not have any water by the start of the weekend, having been left without water since the Tuesday evening.

Those residents included vulnerable customers who could not be expected to leave their homes, never mind walk for an hour. Those residents are entitled to sign up to what is called the priority services register. Residents on the PRS should receive deliveries of bottled water, as well as additional support and communications from Thames Water, yet throughout the outage I was contacted by residents on the PRS who were not receiving any of that help on time—some were receiving no help at all.

Along with local volunteers, my team and I knocked on hundreds of doors across the local area, including on the evening of Valentine's day—which, as someone pointed out, might be the reason I am still single. We identified those who might need additional help and delivered bottled water to them all over the weekend. This included residents who were pregnant, those who were disabled, and some who were terminally ill. One constituent's story particularly sticks in my mind: a disabled single mum of two, reliant on oxygen, was left without water for days, without any support or emergency deliveries from Thames Water. The compensation she received for that failure was a £40 good-will payment.

While I thank every volunteer who helped with that effort, it should never have been necessary. It was Thames Water that had a responsibility to safeguard vulnerable customers and provide alternative sources of water. This week, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham West and East Dulwich (Ellie Reeves) and I met representatives of Thames Water to talk to them about that water outage and some of the lessons they could learn from it. One of the points I made to them was that this is not like covid, which sprung up without any warning; burst water pipes happen all the time, and frequent and consistent communication is a pretty standard thing that constituents and customers are entitled to expect.

However, I do not mention this ordeal just to highlight the unjust plight of my constituents. Their experience embodies the failure of the water system highlighted by

the Bill that my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South has introduced. The previous Government failed to drive investment in the system and abdicated their responsibility to regulate. A failure to maintain, invest and build has led to an aching system, one in which over 50% of Thames Water's sewage treatment plants have inadequate capacity and where, in 2024 alone, Thames Water discharged raw sewage into rivers for nearly 300,000 hours.

All the while, that failure was rewarded. In 2023-24, Thames Water paid executive bonuses worth over £1.3 million—a reward for failed management, aided and abetted by the previous Conservative Government, that has left an investment shortfall of £24 billion. It is our constituents who pick up the tab for that shortfall, left to pay the price of failure, with some quite literally seeing their bills double. I do not dispute that investment is needed, but this must never be allowed to happen again. I am pleased that this Government have taken immediate action, including bringing criminal charges against persistent lawbreakers, giving regulators the power to ban executive bonuses, introducing severe and automatic fines for offences, and ringfencing money for vital infrastructure investment.

I also want to talk about a lesser-known reform that relates to compensation, which is the guaranteed standards scheme. Admittedly, it is not a document I had familiarised myself with before constituents were left without water, but it lays out the minimum compensation rates for water outages. Last month, my constituents were entitled to a measly £30 for each 12-hour period when they were left without water, or a one-off payment of just £25 for low pressure. The reason why those rates are so low is that they were last updated in the year 2000, so I am glad that this Government have acted to finally reassess them. New plans mean that low pressure incidents could see payments of up to £250—a 1,000% increase—and payments for water outages will rise to £50, plus an additional £50 for every 12 hours that the incident remains unresolved. I am pleased that our new Government are acting quickly to fairly compensate those who suffer from water outages in the future.

Reforms to our water system and today's debate are not just about security of supply, but are also about protecting our waterways and coasts. That is something my constituents deeply value, as do I. During my campaign to come to this place, I invited Feargal Sharkey—the prominent water campaigner and one-time frontman of the Undertones—to visit Cator Park and the small stream of Chaffinch brook in my constituency. We visited the Friends of Cator Park and Alexandra Recreation Ground, which does so much for the park. That organisation and all the environmental campaigners I have met in my constituency understand that our waterways are a crucial part of our environment and play an irreplaceable role in sustaining our biodiversity.

I will just finish on this point: I have been most impressed in my constituency by so many of the young people I have met on school visits. From engaging with young people across Beckenham and Penge, I know how much this issue matters to the next generation. I will give two examples. I was contacted recently by Daniel, a year 12 student and a member of the Langley Park school for boys environmental society. He and others took the initiative to contact me for help exploring funding opportunities for their biodiversity scheme.

The society's members are determined to support wildlife around the school and across our constituency. They had already organised a clothes swap and bake sale to raise funds to do so, and I look forward to meeting them soon.

I also recently met members of the fabulous eco council at Stewart Fleming primary school, who displayed real care for the environment—for preserving it not just for themselves, but for the generation after them. They are working closely with the Friends of Betts Park, helping to ensure that it, and the short section of the Croydon canal in it, remain an attractive place for people to visit.

I thank and commend so many other schools across Beckenham and Penge that have active eco councils. They often sit alongside school councils, which every primary school has—schools including Clare House, Churchfields, Balgowan, St Mark's, Shortlands and many others. On Wednesday evening this week, I visited Beckenham scouts, who are a fantastic group of young people. We played a game where they set their own Budget and said what they would spend and prioritise, as if they were Chancellor, and the environment always came out as one of the top priorities.

I hope that Members have learned that we have fantastic waterways in south-east London. The reforms to our water system that my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South has been pivotal in pushing for are crucial to protect not just consumers and constituents, but our national heritage and environment, which I know are held dear by every generation in Beckenham and Penge.

12.16 pm

**Alison Taylor** (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) for bringing this important debate to the House. I could definitely hear him on the Back Benches, so I thank him for that.

In Scotland, thanks to a Labour Scottish Executive, water was retained in public hands. While that does not mean that everything is perfect in Scotland, it does provide a good comparison with England and Wales. Since privatisation, water bills in Scotland have been consistently lower than in England, and customer satisfaction is consistently highest for Scottish Water; all other water companies trail behind. My hon. Friend is right that it is time for a national conversation on the future of water management in the United Kingdom. The experience in Scotland and Scottish Water have much to offer in that conversation.

Water companies need to provide clean drinking water and remove and treat our waste at a reasonable cost over a sustained period. Those should be the measures that we use to determine whether a water company is delivering or failing. So much of our water infrastructure was established generations ago, and our demands and expectations have changed over time. It is staggering to think that so much of what we rely on today has largely remained unchanged since it was first laid down. There needs to be sustained investment in replacement and renewal.

I wonder whether the regulation in place has been sufficient to ensure that investment is made. Perhaps the previous Government were less concerned about the



[*Alison Taylor*]

right balance between dividends for shareholders and investment in infrastructure, but this Government will need to take action to ensure that the mistakes of the past are not allowed to jeopardise the water system we need now and in the future.

Scotland is endowed with significant water resources, which contribute greatly to the national character and beauty of Scotland. My constituency of Paisley and Renfrewshire North sits on the banks of the River Clyde, which has seen significant improvement in water quality over the past 20 years. That is thanks in no small part to collaboration between the public water company and other agencies. They have co-ordinated their actions and invested in the long-term future of the Clyde catchment, all without the constraints of shareholder funds.

I do not want to pretend that everything in Scotland is always perfect. We have had issues with leakage and some notable uncontrolled discharges in my constituency, particularly in Inchinnan, but managing the water and, importantly, sewage is a complex business that requires long-term planning and investment. Scotland seems to have avoided some of the worst experiences of coastal communities in England, where untreated sewage has been released into water bodies almost daily. The small number of activists have been joined by many thousands more who regularly enjoy our coastal and freshwater environment.

In my role as a member of the Environmental Audit Committee, I was reminded of the source-pathway-receptor model for assessing environmental pollution. Even if the discharge remains the same, if the number of people exposed to it increases, the impact of the discharge increases, so the urgency of remediation increases. That is one factor at play in uncontrolled discharges from treatment works, and it is one reason why some of the practices that might have been appropriate in the past are no longer acceptable.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South, I want the water industry to do better and be better. I welcome this debate. It poses many of the important questions that our water companies need to address, and I am sure that the Government will want to make substantial progress in this area in the years ahead. I thank my hon. Friend again for presenting his proposals to the House.

12.21 pm

**Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): I, too, congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis), and I commend him for the passion with which he introduced the debate. I believe that I serve the best community in the country, and I am aware that I have constituents in the Public Gallery, but I do not play to the gallery. My community is shaped by the River Thames, literally, because the constituency's northern border is the river. My constituents are subject to only one water operator, Thames Water, and I come here to serve my constituents by seeking pragmatic solutions. They want safe, affordable water, and problems fixed when they arise. I very rarely find constituents who obsess over who provides it.

Let us not beat around the bush: there is no doubt that Thames Water has been run into the ground. Customers in Southwark have a right to be angry. They

have faced higher bills, leaks and sewage—it has been a disgrace. The great promises of privatisation have failed to materialise over 35 years. Sadly, the promise of lower bills and a more efficient industry has turned to dust.

The figures speak for themselves. It was reported last year that, since 2020, there have been at least 72 billion litres of sewage discharges into the Thames—I say “at least” because not all outlets are monitored. We should thank River Action and others, including wild swimmers, for their work on the issue. Wild swimmers are welcome at Greenland dock in my constituency. I am yet to take the plunge—literally.

Prosecutions of Thames Water by the Environment Agency for pollution incidents led to fines of £35.7 million between 2017 and 2023. Earlier this year, Thames Water was fined £3.3 million after it killed more than 1,400 fish by discharging millions of litres of untreated sewage into rivers. The company admitted four charges in an Environment Agency prosecution. That is unacceptable. It is prosecutable under existing law, and the company needed to do more. Change is required; it was promised in our manifesto, and I believe that the Government intend to deliver it.

I want to give a few examples from my constituency of how Thames Water operates. My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) spoke about standpipes. As my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham and Penge (Liam Conlon) said, we see people affected by outages, as companies like to call them, and in that case, bottled water is meant to be provided. Too often, that is pushed on to councils to provide, rather than it being dealt with by the company responsible for failing to deliver such a basic essential.

I have had to intervene to support constituents in some frankly bizarre cases. In Stevenson Crescent, a constituent came to me who had a leak from a pipe by her front door for 15 years, leading to higher water bills. There was a dispute between Thames Water and her landlord, Hexagon Housing Association, and neither would take responsibility. Both said that she owed money and should pay. It should not take a Member of Parliament's intervention to get companies and landlords to sort out a problem that had been going on for so long that it was causing damp and mould in this woman's home. It is a disgraceful state of affairs, and the Government should seek to change it through legislation on how these companies operate.

On Welsford Street, Thames Water stored equipment, blocking emergency vehicles and causing disruption for about 18 months, which was unbelievably callous and disrespectful. In Janeway Street, near my constituency office, builders damaged kerbing and paving without care for how people used it, and they fenced off pavements, which caused disruption for people with pushchairs and wheelchairs. When Thames Water attended a flat above my constituency office, opposite Bermondsey tube station, it removed the gate at the back of my office and did not bother to put it back. I do not know why it thought I would not be on to it. In Oakville House, there was a sewage leak into the boiler room, which meant that residents were left without heating or hot water in December, when temperatures were below zero. That was completely unacceptable, and it was not fixed fast enough.



At Bermondsey village hall—yes, there is a village hall in Bermondsey in central London—there was a leak in the car park. Thames Water refused to accept responsibility. The water meter in this community facility was going like a desk fan. The hall is run by Chris Parsons, a wonderful community stalwart who runs the policing and ward panel; the last time I was in the village hall was to run a community safety forum. She is also involved in St Olave, St Thomas and St John United Charity, a historic charity providing education support and funds to people in difficult circumstances in my constituency. It does tremendous work, although there are issues that need sorting out, and Chris is working with me before the Charity Commission has to formally be involved.

Chris runs the community hall. It is a genuine community facility reliant on the good will of volunteers and people like Chris. The owner of the building—Leathermarket JMB, a co-operative—and Chris came to me because Thames Water would not acknowledge that it was responsible. It took months to sort this very basic problem. It took bailiffs turning up for debts that they claimed were thousands of pounds, and the threat of legal action. It was incredibly heavy-handed, and it was symbolic of the company's attitude and uncaring model. My hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Norwich South referred to the excesses of the sector. This is a good example of its lack of care for the customers it is meant to serve, and about the leak, which was pouring gallons of water underground, potentially damaging the foundations of other buildings.

Then there are the roadworks on Brunel Road. Two weeks ago today, Thames Water began work on Brunel Road. That has directly caused the loss of two bus services: the 381 and the C10. Brunel Road is in Rotherhithe. The constituency is shaped by the river. Rotherhithe is an Anglo-Saxon name that means "a landing place for cattle". Rotherhithe is the docks. That means shipping—not just shipping of goods and trade, but shipping of people.

Other Members might claim credit for the Mayflower, but we know in Rotherhithe that the Mayflower set sail for the United States in 1620 from Rotherhithe. The master of the Mayflower, Christopher Jones, is buried in St Mary's Church in Rotherhithe. My hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South talked about democracy. The reason the Mayflower set sail, crewed and was boarded by pilgrims in London was that they were seeking democratic and religious freedom. Americans claim the Mayflower as part of their democratic history. There is an amazing book on this written by a constituent in Bermondsey called Graham Taylor, "The Mayflower in Britain: How an icon was made in London", which came out on the quatercentenary of the Mayflower journey—that is in 2020, for anyone struggling with the maths. It is about how the investors and the people boarded in London, rather than anywhere else.

I was talking about Brunel Road. Rotherhithe is a peninsula of 20,000-plus people. The 381 and C10 buses being cut off is hugely disruptive, forcing some people to walk more than a mile to get an alternative bus. Two weeks ago Thames Water used an emergency process to seek permission for its works, sending an email after council officers had left the building. There is a legitimate question about whether Southwark council should have had better access to emails over the weekend to see that

emergency email pointing out works, but Thames Water used that emergency process and dug up the road. It could have done one side and then the other, but it chose to shut off the whole road—underhand and uncaring about the impact of the works. The works are supposed to finish today, and I hope they do, but if they do not, I hope Ministers will consider new powers for councils to block the misuse of emergency procedures, such as in that case.

Brunel Road is not named after Isambard Kingdom Brunel. Better than him, it is named after his father Marc—this is perhaps linked to the debate. Marc fled left-wing revolutionaries in France who were scrapping private ownership, not just without giving compensation but by taking off the heads of anyone who opposed it. More importantly, Marc Brunel designed and built the Thames tunnel, just a stone's throw from the King's Bench debtors prison, where he was locked up until the Duke of Wellington as Prime Minister funded a grant to release him so that he could build that tunnel, which was a feat of engineering at the time.

Drilled from Rotherhithe to Wapping, it was the first subaqueous tunnel in the world, and for many years the largest soft-ground tunnel. Invented in order to achieve that engineering feat was the tunnelling shield, one of the basic tools of modern civil engineering. The tunnel was completed in 1843. Originally it was just for pedestrians, but it has developed over time. It was unforeseeable at that time how it would go on to be used, at one point becoming part of the London underground. I am digressing, but if Members want to know more about Brunel history, the Brunel Museum in Rotherhithe is amazing and they should go. The museum actually sells Isambard Kingdom Brunel socks—though other Brunels are available.

Coming back to my point, the modern contrast with the Thames tunnel is the Tideway tunnel. Thames Water should have been in a secure place to deliver the modern tunnel that has gone under the Thames, but because it was mistrusted and because of the debt it had already accrued, it was not in a place to be able to deliver the new engineering feat that we have seen in my constituency. This engineering feat of the 21st century will improve the environment, take in storm overflow, prevent environmental damage and take some of the excess sewage away from London.

It is 7.2 metres wide, which is the equivalent of three London double-decker buses, for those who measure things by double-decker buses. The two connection tunnels are 5 metres and 2 metres in diameter respectively—5 metres being roughly the size of a London underground tunnel. One of the vertical shafts for the engineering tunnel is in Chambers Wharf, next to my constituency office, and came with a cofferdam—not without its detractors—that went right up close to people's homes behind my office. That project was run well and gave compensation to the people directly affected, including those affected when the piling for the tunnel got stuck and there was drilling throughout the night until 5 o'clock in the morning. Members can imagine the complaints I got over that issue.

A cofferdam could have provided a new park for the community, with views back to Tower Bridge where people like to take selfies, but no one was willing to take on the maintenance and cost, and Thames Water was not in a position to be trusted. Instead of diverting to a new company to build this tunnel, Ministers under the

[*Neil Coyle*]

last Government should have acted to address the problems that led Thames Water not to be trusted. As usual, the last Government left problems of that nature to be dealt with by a more responsible alternative, and here we are today talking about this Bill.

I make no bones about it; I am unconvinced that the state taking over is a solution, partly for the reasons I have stated. It is not a permanent solution on any grounds. I have serious doubts that making Thames Water a state-owned body would make the situation any better, given the faults it has.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I know you will be interested to know what my constituency party thinks. It debated this issue just last week, and out of more than 1,000 members, eight supported the nationalisation of Thames Water as an emergency motion. I thank those members for contributing, including Karen, Andy, Richard and others. It was useful to hear why they felt it was important. There were a lot of shared concerns about how the company is run, for the reasons I have outlined. I would like to thank Mike, Julie and other members who did not believe that simply nationalising it is a solution. They believe that state-owned does not necessarily equal better, cleaner or cheaper water, and there is no guarantee that things would be cheaper under a state-owned model.

We should look at evidence from other state-owned institutions. Nationalisation is not a magic bullet. Civil servants have many qualities, but running utility businesses is not necessarily in the Whitehall skillset, especially after 14 years of degradation. With Ministers such as Jacob Rees-Mogg, it is no wonder people were working from home. We have criticised the degradation of the civil service, but some supporters of the Bill suggest that civil servants have the skills and expertise to run a utility business.

**Clive Lewis:** I thank my hon. Friend for an excellent speech. I have learned so much history; it has been very interesting. He might be surprised to learn that I do not believe in state ownership of our water assets either. The Bill gives the public the final say on that, along with the Secretary of State and the commission. There are so many other models to consider: municipalised models, mutuals, handing the companies partly over to the strategic authorities and the Mayors that the Labour Government are setting up. There are myriad opportunities, options and routes to go down.

People say that the change would not be cheaper. I draw my hon. Friend's attention to research by Visiting Professor David Hall and Conor Gray at the University of Greenwich. They said that the savings from within the system on a transition to some form of public ownership would amount to between £3.2 billion and £5.8 billion annually for England and Wales—enough to deliver price cuts of between 22% and 34%—because there would be lower rates for the financing of future expenditure.

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

**Neil Coyle:** I am not clear where in the Bill such savings are supposedly achievable. I think it is naive to assume that things would automatically be better if the

ownership of a water company were changed and it was run by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs or the Treasury. We also have comparisons with France: Paris has a publicly owned water system, yet during the Olympics triathlon, events were repeatedly delayed due to poor water quality caused by sewage spills.

The cost has been touched on. The Social Market Foundation estimates that nationalising the water industry would cost a small fortune. Share and debt holders would need to be compensated, costing an estimated £90 billion—that is based on Ofwat's regulatory capital value for companies in England and Wales. It would cost billions, take time and be extremely complex, and the burden of financing investment in the water and sewerage infrastructure would simply be transferred to my constituents, with no guarantee that future Ministers would provide the funding that the water system needs. And, of course, the debts would become public and go on to the Government's balance sheet.

A state-owned system might also deter overseas investors in other water companies; that was one of the features of the debate we had in my constituency last week. All that would come at a time when the country is seeking to step up investment not only in water and sewerage infrastructure but in energy generation. I am not keen on anything that would block investment and slow growth, particularly when it comes to green, more environmentally friendly energy production.

I think it is right that the Government have not set out plans to nationalise water. I am interested in results for the people I serve. I welcome the fact that Ministers want to tackle the problems in the sector as quickly as possible by improving what we have. In 2019, frankly, voters were scared—so scared of our former leader and our manifesto commitments that they chose Boris Johnson over us. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South commends an element of populism in the support for water nationalisation, but given the populism that we have lived through and how we got into the situation the country faces now with Brexit, we should be more mindful and wary of simply saying that we should all welcome populist ideas. The public generally support the death penalty, but most of us would not recommend adopting that.

We went to the polls last year and did very well, in case anyone has not noticed. Our manifesto said specifically—on page 59, in case anybody does not remember, although I am sure everyone read it avidly:

“Labour will put failing water companies under special measures” and that we would prevent dumping and empower the regulator. It went on:

“We will give regulators new powers to block the payment of bonuses to executives who pollute our waterways and bring criminal charges against persistent law breakers. We will impose automatic and severe fines for wrongdoing and ensure independent monitoring of every outlet.”

The water industry is not represented here today, so I want briefly to be the devil's advocate. The industry would say that it has responded to our election and to some of the public concerns. For example, it would say that it has set out plans to invest £104 billion between 2025 and 2030 to support economic growth, build homes and secure our water supplies. It would outline that our drinking water is, I think, the joint third best in the world, which is something to be proud of. It would also

say that between '89 and '23-24, the water industry invested more than £236 billion in real terms and £431 billion in total expenditure terms. The water industry would want us to focus on Ofwat and the role it has played. It claims that, had water bills risen with inflation, there would be £18 billion of additional funding—that is the figure from Water UK. From April 2020 to April 2025, Ofwat cut investment plans by £6.7 billion; that sum could have dealt with some of the issues. How we deal with the regulator is an important focus going forward.

On pollution, the water industry would say that it is not just about the water industry. Agriculture is believed to contribute to 40% of water-quality failures, and we do not spend enough time focused on other problems. On quality of service, apparently just under 16 billion litres of water are supplied to customers every day, which is the equivalent of 140.4 litres a day per person according to Ofwat's figures. I am not sure how everyone is using their share—I intend to use mine.

The water companies would highlight the support that they provide to customers. They have provided £1 billion of financial support since 2020, including supporting 100,000 people during the pandemic with payment breaks, according to the Consumer Council for Water. They would also say that leakage is down, but, as I have said, my constituents think it is still too high and want to see further action.

Another issue affecting my constituency is blockages. We have not focused on this very much today, but in the UK there are 300,000 sewer blockages every year according to Utility Week. That is partly the result of 7 million wet wipes, 2.5 million tampons, 1.5 million sanitary pads and other things being incorrectly flushed down our toilets, including condoms and nappies. I ask people please to stop that—I am not suggesting that anyone in the Chamber or in this debate is responsible.

A business on Blackfriars Road that had been directly affected in 2018 by a blockage came to me. The smell and disruption were disgusting. It was a fatberg—I think that is the polite term: a blockage the size of three buses and weighing five tonnes. Appropriately, it was near the bottom end of Blackfriars Road—where else? It was dissected on Channel 4—where else?—on a programme called “Fatberg Autopsy: Secrets of the Sewers”, which is how we know the weight and what was in it. It was not the biggest fatberg in my constituency, never mind in the country—I assume they are worse in London. There was also a 30-tonne monster fatberg under Southwark cathedral and Borough market. Those fatbergs and problems in the sewers and the size of the oldest sewers are why we need the Tideway tunnel.

As I said, Ministers in the former Government should have addressed the concerns of Thames Water and not built a whole new model to deliver a tunnel that will help to address some of those challenges. We can contrast that with the Minister since 2024, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), who is in her place. We also have the Secretary of State, who represents a seat in Croydon—I should have looked that up. I thank them for acting on the manifesto that was raised with me and supported by so many constituents.

The Water (Special Measures) Act was delivered fast by this Government and delivers on the manifesto aims, but we should allow it to be implemented before we consider any other legislation. The Act delivers on

promises by blocking bonuses for executives who pollute our waterways, bringing criminal charges against persistent lawbreakers, enabling automatic and severe penalties and ensuring the monitoring of every sewage outlet. Those are all useful and would have helped to tackle issues with Thames Water and other companies in the past. As I say, we should allow that legislation to be implemented before we look at further adapting and changing it.

The way in which we regulate is important; we cannot bind a future Government. A regulated market with clear safeguards for consumers, a ban on profiteering and a system that delivers long-term investment with a clear framework in regulation is far better. That is the aim of the Government, which was delivered within months of the election. Of course, that was followed by the review, which will shape further legislation in time. With apologies to my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South, I believe this Bill should wait until we see its outcome. The Independent Water Commission has objectives for the water industry and strategic spatial planning—all the “blah, blah, blah” bits—but, importantly, it also has Labour values in its objectives on affordability for customers, water company governance, and operational and financial resilience.

The commission also includes key measures that have not yet been touched on in this debate, including ensuring the water industry's long-term stability, allowing it to attract investment, rationalising and clarifying the requirement for water companies to achieve better environmental measures—[*Interruption.*] I am being encouraged to go faster. The commission's objectives also include improving the industry's capacity.

I apologise for talking a little longer than expected. Any new legislation on the water industry must be mindful that nationalisation without compensation damages the whole sector and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South must be aware, forces the state to do more at a time when the Government are having to cut other budgets.

As I said, the motion on this issue did not pass in my constituency, but we have more in common on tackling the abuses in the system, including Thames Water's abuse of my constituents, the lack of care about operations, the abuse of customers on bills and leaks, and the abuse of the state when a company that believes it is too big to fail expects us to step in.

I do not put form before function, and I am focusing on the functions of an effective water company. I am proud that we have delivered our manifesto commitment, and I look forward to further action from Ministers.

12.46 pm

**Chris Hinchliff** (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) on introducing a Bill that directly addresses one of the most strongly felt public sentiments in my constituency and across the country. The work he has done on this Bill, with Unison and others, deserves great respect.

I support many of the measures that the Government have swiftly taken to address the failures in our water system since taking power. Blocking bonuses for bosses of polluting water companies to end the absurd financial rewards for the destruction of our natural heritage,



[Chris Hinchliff]

and ringfencing billpayers' money for long overdue improvements to infrastructure are positive steps in the right direction.

**Clive Lewis:** Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government's Water (Special Measures) Act 2025 could have instructed Ofwat to take a far more rigorous approach to the payment of bonuses? At the moment, bosses do not get their bonus if they have a one-star rating. In the last 15 years, every single water company, except one, has had more than a one-star rating, hence they have been able to pay bonuses. Does my hon. Friend think that could have been tightened up?

**Chris Hinchliff:** The Minister is shaking her head, but I agree that it is difficult to see how any boss could qualify for a bonus in the current system.

I would be failing to adequately represent the constituents of North East Hertfordshire if I did not make it clear that they have no faith whatsoever that private water companies, after years of disgraceful neglect, can now be trusted to restore the health of our rivers. The residents who sent me to this place are rightly furious at being asked to pay more to make good the malpractice from which water companies have been profiting.

The public do not want to pay towards rescuing discredited corporations that have spent decades extracting wealth from our countryside and polluting our rivers to the detriment of wildlife, the pleasures of wild swimming, and any ordinary citizen who cares about the natural world. No doubt, some of the activities and profits of these companies have been included in the calculations of our nation's GDP. Nothing could demonstrate more clearly that, so often, what passes for valuable economic activity in this country in reality inflicts enormous costs on the public, while threatening the very environment that underpins true prosperity and wellbeing for all.

Frankly, it is difficult to disagree with my constituents when they say that, given the damage done by water companies to our rivers through a combination of over-abstraction and pollution, Ofwat is wrong to allow them to charge so much as an extra penny on bills, never mind the staggering 31% increase granted to Thames Water. The residents contacting me about this issue have repeatedly called for water companies to pay for the damage they have done. They say that if the water companies cannot afford to do so without going bankrupt, then let them. And should nationalisation be required as a result, then let Parliament set the appropriate level of compensation for shareholders, netting off not just company debt, but all the dividends shelled out while our rivers and streams have choked with pollution.

I recognise that Parliament is not yet ready to accept the radicalism of the wider public on this issue, but this Bill offers a clear and pragmatic solution both to restoring democratic faith in the management of our water system, and to ensuring that it puts people and nature before profit. The whole saga we have witnessed in our water system means that we can now say, in all candour, that the capitalism of Adam Smith, in which the aggregate of self-interested economic decisions produces the collective good, in so far as it ever did exist, is now just a folk story told to justify the actions of the richest members of our society.

When it comes to our water system, the free market is a myth, and pretending it exists has only served to inject more pollution into our environment and inequality into our economy, as has happened on almost every occasion on which we have privatised one of our nation's major assets. The Bill offers a solution to reassuring residents in Baldock that the Ivel will flow fully once again; to residents in Buntingford that planning consultations will no longer be waived through, where they will cause already overloaded infrastructure to flood people's homes with sewage; and to residents in Barkway that effluent will no longer flow into our rivers for hundreds of hours every year.

Something which unites the rivers at each of the locations I have just referred to is that they are all chalk streams. We are proud custodians of 10 of these internationally significant waterways in North East Hertfordshire and I would be remiss not to take this opportunity to ask Ministers to publish the ready-to-go chalk stream recovery pack. It would be a move warmly welcomed by many local groups in my constituency and across the country. I would like to extend an invitation to Ministers to join me in visiting the River Ivel in my constituency to discuss a superb chalk stream restoration pilot project that could be implemented there.

To conclude, the Bill has my full support and I hope that Ministers will reflect its whole spirit in their responding remarks today.

12.52 pm

**Mark Ferguson** (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) on bringing forward the Bill. He addressed it with the passion for which he is well known. He is also a person of culture, so he will not mind if I begin briefly by quoting a little bit of Philip Larkin:

If I were called in  
To construct a religion  
I should make use of water.  
Going to church  
Would entail a fording  
To dry, different clothes;  
My litany would employ  
Images of sousing,  
A furious devout drench,  
And I should raise in the east  
A glass of water  
Where any-angled light  
Would congregate endlessly.

Water throughout history has been a crucial part of what it means to be human. As we are all painfully aware from primary school science lessons, we are majority water. But culturally, water is incredibly important as well.

In my constituency, people may be aware of "Fog on the Tyne" and "The Waters of Tyne". "The Blaydon Races" does not mention the River Tyne directly, but it crosses the river between verses. Tourism, as I mentioned in an intervention, is critical, and water plays a huge part in that, with the Gateshead quays and the Newcastle quayside on the opposite side of the river. When people come to the north-east, the river tends to be a place where they get their photo taken. Obviously, the quality

of the photo depends somewhat on the quality of the waterways. In the past, Tyneside was known predominantly for coal and our coal industry. That had a huge impact on industry and our economy, but also on the river itself. Subsequent years have seen significant improvement, but I do not think anybody wants to go back to the days when the water in the River Tyne could not be drunk—I dare say that given some of the sewage that has been poured in from other contributing rivers, we might want to give that some very serious thought today.

These are the challenges that Governments face when they inherit a water system that can be described as little more than a national shame. The Conservative party presided over millions upon millions of tonnes of sewage being dumped into our water system by unscrupulous and unregulated water companies. Our water system is not an abstract concept. As was mentioned earlier, it is the water that our children swim in, or that we wish them not to swim in. It is the water we drink. It leads to the bills that our constituents pay. As has been implied, people do not necessarily feel that they are getting value for money from the current system.

Frankly, it is incredibly important that the public trust that institutions such as Parliament will protect one of life's most basic necessities, which is why I was proud to support the Government's Water (Special Measures) Act earlier this year. However, I believe there is a lot in my hon. and gallant Friend's Bill that is worthy of discussion. As I will come to later, I am not convinced by some aspects of it, but he has certainly done us and the public a service by bringing forward this Bill today.

As mentioned earlier, there will barely be a constituency that is not touched by a river or a significant body of water, or that is not part of a coastal area. My constituency is bordered by not just the famous River Tyne, but the River Team and the River Derwent, and FloodMapper UK reports sewage discharges into both the Team and the Tyne. There are people up and down this country who have suffered because of these failures. Surfers Against Sewage have already been mentioned. Some 75% of UK rivers now pose a serious risk to health due to dangerous levels of sewage and human waste being dumped into them. I have learned today that we can use the word "turd" as parliamentary language, and no one should have to deal with turds, whether in a stream, a river, a sea or elsewhere. Madam Deputy Speaker, I promise that I will not add "turd" to my regular parliamentary lexicon, but it is important to use it in the context of this debate.

Surfers Against Sewage have noted that nearly 1,800 reports of sickness after bathing are linked to sewage discharge. There are many ways I would not wish to become unwell, but doing so by consuming sewage while swimming is perhaps the most unpleasant that one could face. This is a public health crisis, and people are getting sick. Surfers and swimmers are falling ill after taking to the water. As has been mentioned, parents are warning their children to keep away from local rivers. In 2025, it is utterly shameful that we have to warn people not to touch the water in one of the wealthiest countries in the world.

I have already referred to tourism, and many of us who travel to other countries will be familiar with the regular question, "Should I drink tap water or bottled water?" The idea that tourists may begin to question the

quality of our waterways is a real concern, and it is one of the untold economic impacts that have not really been touched on when we have thought about water pollution.

Our constituents are paying the price, because their water bills have risen and risen while standards have unfortunately dropped. Standards have dropped in my own constituency, and I am glad that the Government are tackling the untold consequences of the water industry's failures. In my constituency, a school had to close for weeks on end because of flooding, which had a hugely detrimental impact on the students. No child should lose out on a moment's education because of flooding.

One of my constituents—I will not name him, because I have not sought his permission to do so—met me recently to show me the flood damage that is regularly done to his house. Whenever there is significant flooding, water flows through his house and into the back garden. That would be bad enough if he was not in his 80s, had not broken a finger when trying to lift a storm drain, and did not have a loved one with serious health problems who is sleeping downstairs, and for whom he is trying to care. These are the lived realities of our water system's failures. They are not exclusively the failures of the water companies, but all too often the reaction of the water companies has not helped to resolve them.

Although normal working people have lost out, water company bosses have regrettably remained quids in, as has been mentioned already. Yes, billions have been paid to shareholders, but £41 million in bonuses, benefits and incentives has been paid to water executives since 2020. They have paid themselves while allowing the infrastructure of our water system to crumble. The pipes that deliver water to our homes, schools, hospitals and businesses are hundreds of years old and leaking, which is why I will come to something that I am very pleased the Government recently committed to in the Water (Special Measures) Act.

Enough is enough. The BBC announced only yesterday that water companies released raw sewage into England's rivers and seas for a record 3.61 million hours last year because the legislation passed on to us by the previous Government was, I am afraid, ineffective. That is why, within days of being elected last July, the Government announced plans for the Water (Special Measures) Act in the King's Speech, and introduced the Bill to this House on 4 September.

We have talked about the pace of change in this country, and I think everyone on the Government Benches would like us to be able to deliver things as fast as possible. People in the Gallery today and elsewhere in the country are restless for change, but bringing a Bill to this place in September really showed the seriousness of this Government. Bringing a Bill to this place is no small effort, as I am sure my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Norwich South would agree, and therefore for the Government to introduce the Bill in what were the early weeks of this Parliament was, I think, very important.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy):** The first week in September.

**Mark Ferguson:** The first week in September, as the Minister rightly notes. Despite the Conservatives voting against it at every stage, the Act passed.

**Jerome Mayhew:** I would like to give the hon. Gentleman the opportunity to correct the record: the official Opposition did not oppose that Act.

**Mark Ferguson:** I will happily correct the record. Let me say instead, then, that the Conservatives failed to give the Act their full support, which I am sure all our constituents would have liked to see. I am afraid I have seen similar carping recently—over whether the Opposition opposed the Planning and Infrastructure Bill only earlier this week, for instance. As we say in the north-east—I hope, Madam Deputy Speaker, that this is parliamentary language—if you sit on the fence, you tend to get spelks in your bottom. I would advise that abstaining can also have such spelky consequences.

The Water (Special Measures) Act—which, as the shadow Minister notes, the Conservatives did not entirely support or, perhaps, entirely oppose—introduces a number of important changes, including criminal liabilities for water executives and new, tougher penalties, including imprisonment when companies fail to co-operate or obstruct investigations, which used to result only in a fine. If companies fail to comply, the executives will end up in the dock and face up to two years of jail time—a meaningful disincentive. Further changes in the Act include a ban on bonuses for CEOs and those in senior leadership unless high standards are met on protecting the environment, their consumers and financial resilience. I am aware there has already been some discussion about star ratings, and I am sure the Minister will be coming back to that later.

Our plan for change to clean up our rivers, lakes and seas for good is supported by our Independent Water Commission. When it launched last October, it held a huge call for evidence, urging people to provide feedback on what needs to change to clean up our waterways and rebuild our broken water infrastructure. The call for evidence, by the way, closes at midnight on 23 April, so there is still time for people to make their submissions.

That is why the new Labour Government and the Environment Agency have announced these changes. In January, the water sector made record commitments to clean up the environment and invest in new infrastructure, representing a £22.1 billion investment in the environment. I am also particularly pleased at the changes in the Water (Special Measures) Act around the ringfencing of money for investment, so that there is a real focus on investment rather than money slipping away to other places.

I want briefly to come back to citizens' assemblies, because I would hate for my position on this to be misrepresented. I do have concerns as to how national citizens' assemblies can work with a geographically disparate nation. I am constantly concerned that the voices of the people of my region—and, within my region, the people of my constituency—are not always heard in the national conversation. If sometimes I am a little loud, it is because I am trying to make up for that.

It is a shame that the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns) is no longer in her place, because I would have said to her that there is no lack of reading on my part. In fact, Stephen Elstub has written very compellingly on citizens' assemblies. While I do not agree with all his writing, and cannot claim to have read it all, I think he has certainly made some compelling points. I am not inherently opposed to citizens' assemblies

—I believe there are circumstances in which they could work—but I find the idea of having a national citizens' assembly on something as specific as this challenging, and I would like more information on that as conversations in this area progress.

I sense that my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Norwich South is not as reassured as I am by the Water (Special Measures) Act, but having done a little reading over the past few days, I do feel that a lot of the calls made in this Bill have been addressed by the Government's plan for change: ensuring cleaner rivers, lakes and coastal waters through pollution prevention and restoration; strengthening climate resilience by repairing leaks, reducing emissions and integrating renewable energy into water operations; making water more affordable and preventing companies from prioritising shareholder profits over public services; establishing a commission on water; and holding water companies accountable with stricter enforcement measures. This is a pragmatic, reasonable approach.

I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for bringing forward his Bill today. It is welcome that additional time has been given to this important discussion, and I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say in response.

1.5 pm

**Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab):** I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) for introducing this Bill and for his excellent speech—there are not many speeches for which those in the Gallery burst into a spontaneous round of applause.

This is a complex issue and there is no easy solution. As we have heard, the Government are doing a lot of work on this and are holding water companies to account, but the question is whether more can be done. For example, how can my hon. Friend and the Government work together on this, and what can be taken from his Bill? Ultimately, my constituents, who are struggling with the cost of living crisis, do not want to be paying for the failures of the water companies, which are taking billions of pounds for their shareholders while my constituents struggle to turn the tap on. The leaks we have in Brent East are frustrating too, because after the leaks we get potholes, so all of this is interconnected.

In 2023 there was a 54% increase in sewage spills—there were a whopping 464,056 spills in 2023. It is sometimes difficult to put such huge numbers into context, but the average person passes wind 7,000 to 9,000 times a year. I hope that puts into context just how many spills go into our waters and rivers—*[Interruption.]* I sense that is landing really well with people: we can imagine how many times we pass wind, and if we just double that, double that, double that, double that, double that, and double that again, that is how much spillage goes into our waterways.

The water companies do not care. As I have said, they give billions of pounds to shareholders and some of those shareholders are part of tax avoidance schemes. I am really pleased that this Government are also tackling tax avoidance schemes, because that is vital.

Infrastructure is crumbling, pollution is doubling, and my community in Brent East is paying the price—as are other MPs' communities. I was one of 30 or so MPs who signed a letter to say that Thames Water should be



put in special measures, because I do not know of any other company or organisation that can fail so many times and still be able to take money out of the system and give it to shareholders and still have a contract—it makes no sense.

My constituents cannot afford the proposed increase of over 50%. This is about profits being privatised. Sometimes people, especially politicians, talk about profits and say it is the politics of envy; it is not the politics of envy when profits are taken and put in the pockets of millionaires and billionaires while the failures have to be paid for by ordinary citizens. That is not right. It is not just about the environment but about justice, because the least wealthy communities are often hit the hardest. That is why it is so important that their voices are heard in this place.

I am not scared of citizens or of talking to people and having them inform us about the direction of travel. That is what we, as Members of Parliament, are here for, and the more people who talk to us and inform us of what they want to see us doing, the better.

The Olympic rower and legend that is Sir Steve Redgrave is calling on the Government to tackle pollution for profit in the Thames after some of our rowers were sick after competing there. He said:

“We won’t sit quietly while this catastrophe continues.”

He also said that it is “completely unacceptable” and that “urgent action” is needed to stop sewage discharges at dangerously high levels—*E. coli* and bacteria levels are 10 times the Environment Agency’s threshold for waters. The threshold is lower in France, so we cannot really compare our levels with theirs. At the moment, Thames Water is being taken to court by the Good Law Project, defending a staggering £3 billion bailout.

The other thing is this. The water companies are carrying too much debt, but that is how they manage their businesses. That needs to be called out, because the situation cannot continue. My hon. Friend’s Bill comes up with some of the solutions.

I have the wonderful Brent reservoir in my constituency, which is a site of special scientific interest. It keeps water pollution levels down to the extent that we can have some surviving wildlife and fish in our rivers, but it is finding that really hard, and it does not have enough money to keep going. It was recently given £55,000 of funding from the Mayor of London’s grow back greener fund—I thank him for that—and it has managed to put in a floating ecosystem to improve water quality, but that gets harder when Thames Water pumps sewage into our rivers. That cannot continue. Change has to happen, and it has to be accelerated.

1.12 pm

**Chris McDonald** (Stockton North) (Lab): I thank my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) for giving us the opportunity to have this debate, which has ranged from fatbergs to Larkin. It really has been a pleasure. I also thank him for his service in Afghanistan and commend him for his oratory, which left my throat dry as he described the conditions in which he served.

One thing that my hon. Friend asked us to do—I had not expected this—was to consider what Mrs Thatcher would have done. That is not something I am usually asked, and I have to admit that she is not my usual

touchstone when it comes to judgment. However, I am left unconvinced about the need for citizens’ assemblies and I suspect that the late Baroness Thatcher might have thought the same.

Among others, my hon. Friends the Members for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier) and for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack) and the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns) talked about the state of our rivers. I would also like to touch on that in relation to the importance of rivers for biodiversity and recreation and our sense of identity. I represent a constituency bordered by a river, the River Tees—this is an opportunity for me to get on the record for Teessiders that the river is called the Tees, and not the Tee, as is often seen, so Teesside has a double E and a double S. The River Tees has indeed shaped the identity of the people of the region.

The town of Stockton has a 12th century tithe barn that was at the lower boundary of the palatinate of the diocese of Durham so that taxes could be collected easily from the Tees, but it was the emergence of steel, shipbuilding and chemicals during the latter half of the 19th century and the early 20th century that saw the growth of population and the formation of “Steel River”, as it was known, with 100 blast furnaces on the river. That led to such a serious level of pollution that by the 1970s the river was considered to be dead, with black spots. We certainly would not have wanted to step into it, never mind drink it. However, we have seen some real change since then, and have seen industry and the environment live side by side.

On the south side of the River Tees is the Redcar bulk terminal, one of only two in the country that can handle capesize vessels. The terminal was built during the canalisation of the river in the 19th century. There is a site of special scientific interest there, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), which was built on the limestone in the slag. It is the perfect environment for seals and birds. In my constituency, RSPB Saltholme is home to bitterns and the largest inland colony of common terns. It was built in an area surrounded by chemical works that extracted the salt from Saltholme, from the brine fields and salt caverns there; the caverns could even be used to support our hydrogen industry in the future.

The River Tees, once dead, is now regarded as exceptional for trout. A lot of that is due to the improvements made on the river, including the installation of a barrage in the mid-1990s. That has led to an explosion in recreation as well; there is dragon boat racing and all sorts of other water activities, including rowing. We have three vibrant rowing clubs on the Tees. I have done a little bit of competitive rowing in the past; my crew only ever won one race, and it was when the other team pulled up because they thought they had got past the finish line, and we very slowly pootled past them.

**Dame Meg Hillier:** A win is a win.

**Chris McDonald:** Indeed. It was very much a hare and tortoise situation, but I took the win.

One thing I learned from rowing is that you get intimately acquainted with the river on which you row, from head to toe. That is why I was quite shocked when a constituent of mine, Robert, told me that boat crews on their way back now often encounter sewage on the

[Chris McDonald]

River Tees, a river that has been extremely clean. We need to think about the role of the water companies, but also about giving adequate support to the Canal and River Trust, which is frankly underfunded and struggles to afford the capital expenditure that is required to maintain our white water course and the quality of the River Tees. It needs revenue as well as capital support, so I call for that support. Sewage dumping on the Tees has increased by 37% in the past year. That is a real shame, as the town of Stockton is now turning towards the Tees; it has a new riverside park, and there has been investment in the area by local entrepreneurs.

The hon. Member for North Herefordshire mentioned that she has in her constituency the only water company in England that is not for profit—I thought that was a prerequisite for water companies nowadays. We need to see big changes in the water industry, but my reservations about citizens' assemblies mean that I will not support the Bill. However, I would like us all to remember this point about identity and rivers. In the north-east, we have three great rivers: the Tyne, the Wear and the Tees, which define whether a person is a Geordie, a Mackem or a Smoggie. Our rivers have shaped industry and industry has shaped the rivers, but on the Tees at least, both the river and industry have shaped the people.

1.17 pm

**Tristan Osborne** (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): I rise following a number of excellent and eloquent speeches, including from my hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler), who talked about flatulence, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle), who talked about fatbergs. I hope to add some value, and also depth to some Members' contributions.

Rivers are critical to our national identity. It is a pleasure to have the River Medway in my home constituency of Chatham and Aylesford. I believe that my hon. Friend the Minister visited the river a few weeks ago when she came to Southern Water's Ham Hill plant. I also have the benefit of constituents who work, live and play on the river. It is on their behalf that I contribute to today's debate, because whether or not we are passionate about our natural environment, in some way we are all here because of the shape of our landscape. I pay tribute to a number of organisations that lead in this space, including Watershed, which recently released a report; it is diligent in monitoring sewage releases across our country. Surfers Against Sewage, which a number of my colleagues have mentioned, does outstanding monitoring work, and River Action and Friends of the Earth have also engaged with me as a constituency MP.

All of us in this House are doing great advocacy work, alongside Fergal Sharkey and other passionate campaigners. That advocacy has directed the Government towards early implementation of a number of critical policies, and it needs to continue. I welcome that advocacy of those outside the House, and those viewing the debate. Continue being a strong voice on these issues.

Privatisation has failed. Private companies since the Thatcherite privatisation have not been regulated properly, and they have taken significant profits and passed them on in dividends to shareholders. The figure is up to

£60 billion or £70 billion, by some calculations. Flooding, burst drains, rising costs and the bonus culture have all come together to create a system that has lost the confidence of not only the public, but the public politic of this country. Change absolutely needs to happen, which is why I welcomed the Government's Water (Special Measures) Bill, which this Labour Government prioritised from September; it is one of the earliest pieces of legislation that we prioritised after our election. That, coupled with the series of reforms that are coming down the pipe, will bring about fundamental change in our water landscape. I look forward to seeing future reports on that.

The legislation that the Government are looking at will, together with other measures, fix a broken system. In their own words—we on the Government Benches all agree with them—the Government are trying to create a better and more sustainable future, greener and healthier rivers, and stronger governance in our water system. We can all agree that the Government are taking the right direction; it might be just the pace of change that is leading to frustration.

I want to set the debate in its broader context. My concern with this Bill is that we might be going down an ideological cul-de-sac, although I appreciate that my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South has said that he is open to mutuals and other types of co-operative management styles. The debate today has been fixated on national utilities versus private, and that is not entirely an honest debate; take Europe as an example.

**Carla Denyer:** It might be worth clarifying that, as far as I can tell—*Hansard* will prove whether I am right—the majority of the mentions of nationalisation were from Members opposing this Bill, whereas those who support it were talking about other models, including mutualisation and co-operatives.

**Tristan Osborne:** I am happy to take that criticism. I just say this—the hon. Member might like to come back on this—I understand from its manifesto that the Green party is for nationalised utilities. If she supports a citizens' assembly, would the assembly's conversation be narrowly confined to having a nationalised utility, or would she open discussion up to other forms of mutuals and other ways of working?

Moving on, this private versus state debate is not quite the issue it is made out to be. In Europe, there is a significant number of state-run utilities, and they have similar problems with pollution and outflows. The European water regulator has said that there is €75 billion of natural pollution and 37% of Europe's surface water is in an unhealthy ecological condition. The reality is that that is happening under state utilities. The issue is not necessarily about what structures and bodies run water, albeit that I accept that privatised utilities have not worked in this country, but the regulations that they work with. The Government's position is sensible and reasoned; they are handing the issue to a specialist, Sir Jon Cunliffe, who can give regulatory advice on how we can improve the system.

Moving on to the debate about people's assemblies, I agree that they are a good idea. Let a thousand roses bloom. I am happy to receive representation from all bodies. If this people's assembly is non-binding, I do not see the difference between it and any other group

that will be engaging with us in a public space and in a public way. I do not see the necessity of having another non-binding body making recommendations via a structure that we would establish, because it would not have any more weight than any other non-binding body.

I understand that previously, national bodies and people's assemblies have met in Birmingham over a series of weekends, but a lot of the proposed reforms are extremely technical. My worry is that political parties that have a mandate at a general election to either nationalise or not nationalise will simply tie the hands of people's assemblies, binding them to an ideological viewpoint. That may not have a beneficial outcome. This House is the people's assembly, so I do not believe that having non-binding institutions like those assemblies adds any value.

This Government are correct in their approach. If we hand responsibility to Sir Jon Cunliffe, he will be able to look at the issues in much more detail. As I have mentioned, regulatory reform is absolutely necessary, but he will also look at financial resilience—water companies have been able to borrow and leverage too much, which has had a significant impact on the cost of water for many people—and at nature-based solutions, which should be pursued more vigorously.

To conclude, we should wait and see what the independent water commission concludes. We should not make this into an ideological argument. Although people's assemblies have a place, in this case they are non-binding and an unnecessary addition. I welcome other contributions.

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

1.26 pm

**Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con):** It has been an absolute delight to listen to the debate. There were times when I thought that having an official Opposition was unnecessary because of the amount of opposition from Government Members. I congratulate my Norfolk neighbour, the hon. and gallant Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis). I am delighted to have a return of these rather archaic honorifics, because next time he refers to me, he will have to call me honourable and learned, which I know will stick in his craw. I congratulate him on introducing a groundbreaking Bill to the House. It would have a huge impact on the water industry, for good or ill, as I will discuss in the coming minutes.

It is surprising to me, and perhaps to other hon. Members who were in this place before the last general election, to see the total absence of any Liberal Democrat Members in the Chamber. Not even their official spokesperson is here. I remember the amount of noise they made before the election about their views on water. It is telling that when it comes to a groundbreaking piece of legislation that could really make a change, according to the hon. Member for Norwich South, they could not even be bothered to attend. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] I have unified the House. We all agree on one thing, and we know what that is.

The hon. Member for Norwich South made not just a critique of the water companies, but of private ownership in general. I want to address that very briefly, in a single

sentence: capitalism has lifted more people in the world out of poverty and despair than any other economic system in history. However, I recognise that there are many forms of ownership in a capitalist system, including national and public ownership, mutualisation and private ownership.

Before throwing the metaphorical baby out with the almost uniquely clean bathwater that we enjoy in this country, let us take a moment to look back at private sector water company performance, in a way that would have been impossible for me to do prior to the general election, because the campaigning noise was so deafening that rational debate was too often brushed aside. I am taking a risk, but I hope that today, in this Chamber, we can have a more rational and careful debate, and look at the data. Let us look at the private performance, both good and ill. This is not a defence of the status quo, but it is a challenge to the assumption that public ownership is necessarily the solution. I will go back and look at elements of the performance of the private sector over the past 30 years. The first duty of a water company is to provide safe, clean drinking water for its customers. As we heard from the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle), our water industry passes that test with flying colours. It is not just clean water but the cleanest water in the entire world, jointly with one other country—and I hope no one intervenes to ask me which country that is, because I simply do not know. Let us not forget, as we bash the water companies, that they have provided the cleanest drinking water in the world.

The next thing water companies have to do is to make sure that the supply is uninterrupted. We had an experiment with nationalisation of our water industry up until about 30 years ago. During that period, interruptions in the water supply were five times as likely as they are today. To put it another way, privatisation has reduced the interruption of the water supply fivefold. We can argue about why that is, but that is a fact. There are examples of disruption such as the one the hon. Member for Beckenham and Penge (Liam Conlon) referred to, and they are terrible, but in aggregate, the number of disruptions has reduced fivefold. We then turn to leakage. As my neighbour, the hon. Member for Norwich South, says, water is a scarce and valuable public resource, so leakage is very important. Since privatisation, the amount of leakage has reduced by a third.

How has all this been achieved? The answer is that £236 billion has been invested by the private sector in our water infrastructure since 1991. How has it been able to do that? The answer, in my submission, is that it has not been competing with the provision of new hospitals or new schools, and—perhaps Government Members will feel this more closely to their hearts—it has not been competing with personal independence payments for the disabled, the disability element of universal credit or carer's allowance. Try asking the Chancellor of the Exchequer now for £236 billion to be spent from the public funds on water. We know from the debates we have had last week and this week that that is almost impossible.

I turn to performance. There are various ways of measuring performance, but the headline is serious sewage incidents. In the 1990s, the average number of serious sewage incidents was 500 a year. Now it is well below 100. The last year for which I could find data



[Jerome Mayhew]

was 2021, and in that year the number was 62. There are other elements of performance. There are the chemicals being leached into our waterways through treated sewage. The most damaging for biodiversity is phosphorus. Since 1990, because of the investment, the amount of phosphorus entering our waterways through the water treatment system has not increased; it has reduced by 80%. This is at a time when our economy has grown and our population has increased significantly.

The next most damaging chemical is ammonia. Again, since 1990, the amount of ammonia going into the waterways because of treated water has not increased along with population growth or economic growth; it has in fact declined by 85%. The next most damaging chemicals are cadmium and mercury. Since 2008—a slightly different starting point, I accept—the amount of cadmium and mercury has reduced by 50%.

If we take away the emotion and start looking at some of the core data, we can see that there have been very real elements of progress—not universal progress, but real elements of progress because of a huge amount of private investment in our water industry.

**Clive Lewis:** If I could sum up the hon. and learned Member's argument, he seems to be telling the public, "You've never had it so good." I think many members of the public would disagree with that. I would also make the point that all the investment that has gone into our water since privatisation has come from our bills. Private companies have paid dividends and left themselves £60 billion in debt. That is money that otherwise would have been invested into the public water system.

**Jerome Mayhew:** I am absolutely not saying, "You've never had it so good," but I am drawing attention to the actual data, so that we can make a balanced judgment. I will come to some of the disadvantages of the last 30 years later on in my speech, so I hope I will give a balanced judgment.

We have dealt with the rivers and serious sewage incidents—[*Interruption.*] Hon. Members should wait and not be hasty. Sewage discharges from storm overflows have been, without doubt, the greatest area of failure for decades, in both public and private ownership. Why? It is because the problem was hidden for decades. It was not reported, and it was not measured. Back in 2010, the Labour Government monitored only 7% of storm overflows. As a result, we had no idea how frequently storm overflows were being activated, or for how long. Worse, Labour changed the law in 2008—I think one Labour Member present was in Parliament at that time—to allow the water companies to self-monitor their environmental performance.

The Liberal Democrats do not come out of this very well, either. [*Interruption.*] We can all agree on that. During the coalition, there was a Liberal Democrat Water Minister from 2013 to 2015. What action did they take when they held the levers of power? Absolutely none.

It was the Conservatives who forced transparency on the water industry by requiring 100% of storm overflow data to be monitored and then published within 15 minutes. That exposed the problem, and we then took action

through the £56 billion storm overflows discharge reduction plan to fix the problem over 25 years. We all want to go faster, but it is about the balance between costs, the industry's ability to react, and the time a responsible Government have to take these decisions.

We also had a plan to improve the water quality of chalk streams, which is an issue close to your heart, Madam Deputy Speaker. I believe you have the Test in your constituency, and I can beat that with the Stiffkey, the Wensum, the Bure and a couple of others.

Despite the unacceptable storm overflows, the question we need to ask is whether river water quality has got better or worse under privatisation. The difficulty is the lack of comparative data, because as we have monitored more, we have more data points identifying more discharges that were previously unrecorded. One of the best datasets to look at is invertebrate biodiversity, on which there has been a comprehensive study by the UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology, analysing 223,000 samples taken between 1989 and 2018. It looks for biodiversity gain or loss, especially in species that are particularly sensitive to clean water—the mayfly and the caddisfly. You will be pleased to know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that invertebrate biodiversity has tripled in our rivers over the last 30 years, during the period of privatisation.

I am not defending the water companies' lack of inquisitiveness about the number of storm overflow discharges. This terrible problem has to be addressed, and it was being addressed by the last Conservative Government, but it prompts the question: has our water got better or worse, in aggregate, over the last 30 years? The data suggests that it has got considerably better.

I will talk about the pros and cons of privatisation in terms of funding. In my view, there are definite cons to the private ownership model we have had over the past 30 years. I concede that some water companies have exploited weak regulation to take advantage of their monopolistic position. True competition cannot exist because we have monopoly providers. The role of competition is meant to be provided by regulation and, too often, the regulation has been found wanting, particularly on the financial engineering of the leverage that water companies undertook in the noughties, peaking in about 2015.

Again, I accept that that is a problem that should have been prevented, but all the major parties are guilty and played their part. It started under Labour and continued under the coalition—I am afraid that both the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives have their fingerprints on this—before stopping in about 2015, when Ofwat belatedly tightened up its provision. Members will have noticed that the latest return on capital allowed by Ofwat is, from memory, 3.4%, which I submit is a reasonable return on capital and one that individuals might get from a high-interest account.

I hope that I have given a balanced assessment of the good and bad of privatisation over the past 30 years. We need to do that, because it is the basis on which we address the next question about the Bill: what is the right mechanism of ownership? In my view, privatisation has, on balance, been a success, because it has managed to lever in investment to improve our water quality overall, to reduce leakage and outages in the way that I have described, and to provide us with the safest water in the world.

**Clive Lewis:** I thank the hon. and learned Member for his contribution to the debate. Private water companies have invested less than nothing of their private equity in our water system since privatisation—in fact, we have £60 billion-worth of debt. I reiterate that taxpayers' and bill payers' money has gone into the investments in the water system. The private sector has paid less than nothing, so how we can say that a privatised water system—a natural monopoly, for which there is no perfect competition, or no competition at all—is generating innovation or investment? I fail to see that.

**Jerome Mayhew:** The profit motive does promote efficiency in innovation, because companies want to minimise their costs and therefore maximise their profits. It also provides access to capital in the manner that I have described, because there are rights issues as well as the recirculation of water bills. It is right that that is the foundation of the business, but it is not the only access to capital, whereas with public ownership, as we are very aware this week, there are limited funds. We cannot borrow forever. We have what I think are described as iron-clad fiscal rules, which we have heard a bit about recently. We know that this Government, and all Governments, are constrained in their ability to borrow and spend, and that they have other priorities, so we will never get a big budget for water if it is in public ownership.

The Bill has generated a huge amount of interest. I thoroughly agree with elements of it, particularly on nature-based solutions, which build on the "Plan for Water" published by the last Government in 2022. If the Bill proceeds, there are areas that I would like to discuss and develop in Committee, but I will not detain the House any further on them now. I look forward to the progress of the Bill.

1.43 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy):** I thank my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) for securing this debate and giving these important issues the parliamentary attention that they deserve, and for meeting me in January, when he highlighted his concerns about the water industry and helpfully set out what he is trying to achieve with the Bill. For several years he has been a fearless environmental campaigner on this and many other issues.

I thank all campaigners and the public for their interest in the water industry. They are right to hold the Government's feet to the fire and to expect so much better than they have had over the past 14 years. I make the promise to all of them that my duty, my job and what I serve every day in this place to do is to improve and clean up our rivers, lakes and seas and deliver a fair water system to everybody. Although there might be differences of opinion in how we get there, the motivation behind the actions that I take cannot be questioned.

I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss the Bill. I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to this important and wide-ranging debate and all hon. Members who have attended—I am not mentioning the ones who did not.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier), the Chair of the Treasury Committee, made a really important contribution. She

talked about the big nasties, those things that we knew when we came into Government would cost so much money, and the competition that water would potentially face from roads, rail, schools and so much more that needs repairing. She is right to point out that when we talk about shareholders, sometimes in the public imagination we imagine a rich businessman holding all the shares. Quite often, however, they are pension funds that would require compensation if we nationalised. If compensation was not provided, it would have an impact on people's pensions and that would have a real-world impact.

**Carla Denyer:** Will the Minister give way?

**Emma Hardy:** I will try to come to everyone's contributions in 15 minutes—I will try to get through as many as possible.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch is right to point out the appalling state of our rivers, the fact that not enough are in good chemical health and that there is much more to do. To reassure her on wet wipes—fatbergs were mentioned—work on legislation to ban them is ongoing.

I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) that there is so much more that we need to do, and that the levels of pollution are, of course, unacceptable. I completely support what he says on natural flood prevention and hopefully, if time allows, I will go into that in a little bit more detail. He will be very pleased to know that only a few weeks ago we released some beavers into the wild to provide some of the natural flood prevention that we all need. The only thing I would say, though, is that we have some of the cleanest water in the world. In fact, the cleanliness of our drinking water in England is exceptionally high and the UK was ranked in the top eight countries in the world for drinking water safety in the 2024 Environmental Performance Index. I would like to thank a very small regulator that does not often get much attention: the Drinking Water Inspectorate, which is responsible for keeping our water clean. It does an incredible job and I want to put my thanks on the record. I think the water we have in this country is incredibly clean, and I encourage everyone to feel completely safe as they continue to drink it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Frith), in his usual gentlemanly way, praised my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Norwich South for his service. I completely echo his remarks. I make the offer to all Members to support them in seeking accountability from water companies if they require it. That was something I discussed yesterday with water industry reps. If he wants to discuss further his request to look at environmental protections for the river, I am happy to take that up.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Sojan Joseph) highlights the anger the public feel about water pollution and the failures of the past years. He mentioned a number of primary schools—they came up frequently in the debate—and the appalling situation of many people becoming ill after going in the water. That is completely unacceptable. We take really seriously the impact that water, and entering water, has on public health. It is one of the many reasons why I am really pleased that Sir Chris Whitty is on the Independent Water Commission, giving his expert evidence.

[Emma Hardy]

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack) for her work on the Water (Special Measures) Bill Committee and for her tireless campaigning for her constituents who have been flooded over the years. She is right to be outraged by pollution levels.

My hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham and Penge (Liam Conlon) raised the awful outages and the poor distribution service his constituents faced. Vulnerable customers should always receive water—it should be delivered. He is quite right to point to the priority services register. One thing I would ask each hon. Member to do is to encourage the vulnerable people in their community to be on the priority services register, because they are entitled to support in the event of an outage. I am happy to follow that up with him afterwards, if he wants. I echo his thanks to the volunteers. I am sure that on Valentine's day, as he was going around supporting his constituents, they felt incredibly loved by him as their new Member of Parliament.

My hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Alison Taylor) talked about the importance of effective regulation and long-term planning in investment. I thank her for her work on the Environmental Audit Committee.

I should just highlight—as a former primary school teacher, I cannot resist—some of the schools mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham and Penge who are involved in eco-societies: Daniel at the Langley Park School for Boys, Stewart Fleming primary, Balgowan primary, Churchfields primary, Clare House primary, Shortlands primary and St Mark's primary. I commend their excellent work on those eco-clubs, and all those around the country. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]

My hon. Friend the Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) shared his ambition to seek solutions to the problems he faces. That is exactly what drives me too, and is exactly what we should be doing in the Chamber today: seeking solutions together for the problems we face. I thank him for his work supporting his constituents. He always has my support on that, although I have no doubt at all that he does not need much support from me in making his voice or his opinions heard, or in holding companies to account.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead Central and Whickham (Mark Ferguson) quoted Philip Larkin. Without going too far into a history lesson, he might not know that Larkin spent many years working at Hull University, so he is celebrated in my constituency too. As a former teacher, I agree about the importance of education and the awful impact that flooding has on schools, and I share my hon. Friend's restlessness for change.

Ofwat's consultation on the bonus ban has come up, so I want to address it head-on. This week Ofwat published a statutory consultation, which sets out the details of the metrics that will trigger the ban and start the clock on implementation. It is right to say that Ofwat originally consulted only on banning on the basis of a category 1 or category 2 offence, and that it is looking at introducing a more holistic measure of environmental performance through the use of the EA's environmental performance assessment. For those who

are not aware, the EPA has a number of different metrics, including category 1 and category 2 offences for serious pollution incidents, but it also includes self-reporting, discharge permit compliance, the use and disposal of sludge, and, as has come up in today's debate, outages. Those are all holistically put together into one rating. However, I and the public have been crystal clear about our expectation that bonuses should be banned for polluting water bosses, so should the consultation reveal that the proposed metrics need strengthening, Ofwat will review them ahead of final implementation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) said that much more needs to be done, and she is right to point out the impact of leaks on potholes and the wider damage. She always makes very thoughtful contributions, and I join her in celebrating the Government's schemes to tackle tax avoidance. I was delighted that I got a chance to meet Sir Steve Redgrave the other day when he and rowers from Reading University came into DEFRA to hand me a letter and talk about the importance of having clean rivers in which to row.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Chris McDonald) for supporting the Water (Special Measures) Act. I like the idea of rivers being part of our identity and shaping people—what a lovely message to leave us all with.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tristan Osborne) thanked his campaign groups for their advocacy. He is right to say that this Bill is part of the Government's plan for change, and of course we want to deliver more, but public ownership is not a magic bullet to fix this problem.

My hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Norwich South says that we can do things better, and we absolutely can. This Labour Government were elected on a manifesto for change, and with a plan for change. The Labour party was created to serve working people and the working class, and it our duty to do so. That is what drives us every single day. There is little trust in politics and in politicians as a force for good. The benefit of the doubt is never given to politicians; when people are asked about something, the assumption is always that we have an ulterior motive. The only way we can change the public's opinion of politicians is by delivering change.

My hon. Friend talks about ideology driving us, but it is quite simple: I am entirely focused on doing everything I can to clean up our waterways. I care about the public being ripped off, I care about the people working for water companies on the frontline, who face abuse for the job they do, and I care desperately about the natural environment. This is what drives me, and it is what I will be judged on. My approach to decisions is always quite simple: it is about how I can deliver on my aims in the fairest and quickest way possible. Yes, we can do better, and we are doing better. I expect all Members to hold me to account on doing better every day.

On walking into DEFRA, I was told that a meeting would take place on my very first day. We met all the water companies, and we got them to change their articles of association and put customer representatives on their boards. In week four of the new Parliament, we introduced the Water (Special Measures) Bill, which was a down payment on future reforms—it was never intended to be the solution to all the problems. A couple of months later, we launched the Independent Water



Commission to fundamentally reset the entire industry. Then we changed the rules on bathing water. Then we secured £104 billion of investment in the water industry. Then we did the call for evidence. I am now visiting all water boards up and down the country to hold them to account for the promises that they have made, and to make sure that they deliver on ending water poverty by 2030.

I will do more, because this is what I care about and the Government care about. It is about delivering change in this place. That is what we were elected to do. I want to make one thing clear, if nothing else: this Government are absolutely committed to improving the performance of the water sector.

I want to say a little more about the abuse that employees are facing. I have heard about this from the trade unions, and it matters a lot to me. Employees who are going down to fix sewage mains or deal with pollution incidents are not the ones responsible for the problem, yet they face a lot of abuse when they go out and do their job. I would hope that all of us, regardless of our opinion of water companies, ownership or models, would agree that abusing the people on the frontline who are trying to clean up the mess is unacceptable. The employees and trade unions who are talking to me about this have my full and complete support.

I have pretty much run out of time, but briefly, I often see criticism when we talk about the cost of nationalisation. People say, “You’re quoting this think-tank”—the Social Market Foundation—“and those figures are wrong.” One of the things I did when I came in was interrogate the figures on the cost of nationalisation. The £99 billion cost of nationalisation that the Government use is based on Ofwat’s regulatory capital value 2024 estimates. That does not include the Bazalgette tunnel, an asset which would be included in that figure.

I often get told that we are using different costs, so I wanted to explain that that is where we get the figures from. That is the regulated capital value of the assets we have, but that does not assume the ongoing costs. Assuming we would want to deliver PR24, we would be talking about £104 billion of investment over the next five years, plus the cost of acquiring assets. I want to be really clear about the figures I was using.

I will come back to agricultural pollution, because I know the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns) cares a lot about it. Agriculture and rural land management accounts for around 70% of land use. It is one of the greatest sources of water pollution in England, affecting 45% of our water bodies. The levels of pollution are unacceptable. That is why cleaning up our rivers, lakes and seas is a priority of this Government.

We are working with farmers to reduce pollution, which is key to delivering against this priority. We have

committed to a rapid review of the environment and improvement plan, which will set out how DEFRA will deliver these legally binding targets. The Government will develop a new statutory plan to protect and restore our national environment with delivery plans to meet each of our ambitious environmental targets, which include cleaning up the waterways. We are taking action to tackle agriculture pollution and deliver the Environment Act 2021 through a suite of proportionate and effective regulations, advice and incentives.

To conclude, the call for evidence for the Water Commission is now live, so if anyone in this House wanted to assemble a group of citizens to come together in their local communities to discuss this and put their evidence forward, I would entirely welcome that. This Government will not stop until we achieve what we promised in our manifesto, which was to clean up our rivers, lakes and seas. That is what drives me and motivates me, and that is what I will continue working on.

1.58 pm

**Clive Lewis:** With the leave of the House, I will not get back into a tit for tat over some of the comments that have been made at the Dispatch Box, because I would like to thank everyone who contributed to this fabulous debate on a critical issue. I think that most of us want to get to the same place: we want clean, drinkable, swimmable, and surfable water. I thank everyone who took part in this debate. I thank the Minister for all the work she is doing and will be doing. I thank the Opposition too. Even my wife Katy Lewis turned up today to come and listen, so I thank her for that. It is probably the longest say I have had in a debate in quite a while—I will not hear the end of that for a while, I am sure.

I will finish on this point.

I sometimes wonder what would happen if the NHS did not exist and we in this place had to come together to decide how we were going to provide healthcare for the people of this country. Having listened to today’s debate, I think this place would say that it was too difficult to create a national healthcare system and that we could not do something based on need, rather than on profitability and private sector investment. Yet we managed to do that after the second world war, which had absolutely obliterated our public finances, because we knew it was right, and we knew that some things are not to be judged by their profitability, because they are things that we need. Our health is one such thing, and I and millions of other people believe that water is one of them too. I hope that at some point, those on the Benches on my side of this House—my Government—will acknowledge that and do something about it.

*Ordered,* That the debate be now adjourned.—(*Taiwo Owatemi.*)

*Debate to be resumed on Friday 4 July.*

## **Looked After Children (Distance Placements) Bill**

### *Second Reading*

2.1 pm

**Jake Richards** (Rother Valley) (Lab): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I am grateful for the opportunity to bring this Bill before the House. On entering politics, I was determined to raise the issue of children in care and, in particular, the lack of safe, decent accommodation for the most vulnerable children. The state's enduring failure to meet its most basic duty to care for those children for whom their family are unable to care continues to shock me, as it should shock us all. I want to play my part and make a difference, because this matter is close to my heart—not from experience of the care system myself, but from the insights I took from an adjacent perspective before being elected.

I practised as a barrister before entering this place, often in public law and family law, working on complex and heartbreaking cases involving children in care. I represented local authorities trying to safeguard children, parents fighting to keep their families together and children at the heart of the proceedings. Time and again I saw the same pattern: children were removed from their families for their own safety, but they had no place to go. On a Friday afternoon, when I was a very junior barrister, I would often be instructed to attend court for an urgent application to remove a child from their family before the weekend. Those were distressing cases, but upon drafting the order my work would be done. I would set off to enjoy the weekend, but I knew that for the social work team and, more importantly, for the family involved, the traumatic set of events had only just begun.

The process of removing a child can of course be incredibly difficult; the police may be involved, and parents can be forced into an emotional goodbye. Even once a child was in the care of a local authority, there would be desperate last-minute searches for suitable temporary accommodation. Foster carers would be asked if they could take the child just for a weekend, and residential units would be called to see if they had a spare bed. Too often, I was told by social workers of children waiting at local authority offices late into the night while these inquiries took place. On one occasion I was told that a child slept on an office floor because there was no safe place for them to be placed.

My Bill aims to make a very modest but significant change to the way we approach our responsibility to the children's social care estate—in particular, the lack of any meaningful strategy or local initiatives to ensure that there are good, safe care places in every locality across the country, so that children are not placed miles and miles away from their communities, families, schools and friends.

In recent years we have seen a deeply troubling trend of children in care being placed far from home, sometimes hundreds of miles from their communities, schools and support networks, and those placements are no longer exceptional: they are becoming the norm. New data obtained through a freedom of information request I submitted reveals that nearly 10% of all children in care

in England now live more than 50 miles from home. Some 4% live more than 100 miles from home. The number of children placed more than 50 miles from home has risen from just over 6,000 in 2020 to well over 7,000 in 2024. Those are not isolated outliers; they are thousands of children sent far from their schools and support networks, and often their siblings and other family members, not because it is in their best interests, but because there is simply nowhere nearby for them to go.

Even more worryingly, some children are now being placed across borders. The number of children in England moved out of the country, primarily to Wales and Scotland, has risen by 9% since 2020. Placements in Wales alone have increased by 15% over that time. These cross-border moves are even more complex, taking children away from the oversight of their placing authority and often into different jurisdictions, with entirely different education and care systems. Those decisions are not taken through incompetence; they are the result of a system that lacks capacity, co-ordination and meaningful planning, and the impact on children's lives, their education, their mental health and their relationships is profound. Because these are looked-after children—a phrase that ought to promise protection but too often rings hollow—their needs are bureaucratised, their voices are marginalised and their lives are shifted like chess pieces on a board they never asked to be part of.

Distant placements are no longer exceptional, but systemic. In some local authorities, more than 70% of looked-after children are placed outside the home area.

**Fred Thomas** (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend not just for his passion in bringing forward this Bill, but for his service as a lawyer before entering this place. He brings that expertise from his previous profession here. Will he join me in acknowledging that in places such as Plymouth this problem can be even more acute? Plymouth is not particularly near other large cities, so the tendency is for children to be placed in care very far away—sometimes 50 or even 100 miles away, as he highlights. As he gets to the part of his speech where he highlights some statistics, will he just acknowledge—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** Order. May I just point out to Members that interventions, while always welcome, do need to be briefer than that?

**Jake Richards:** My hon. Friend is right. There is a particular problem in the south-west—his part of the country—and in his constituency, which he represents so ably. In fact, there are some care leavers with that experience in the Public Gallery who are from that part of the world. There are particular issues there.

My Bill does not seek to overhaul the care system or burden already stretched local authorities. It sets out three clear practical measures. First, it would place a statutory duty on local authorities to collect and publish data on distant placements—specifically, how many children are placed more than 20 miles from home, and how many have been moved in the past year due to a lack of suitable local provision. Secondly, it would require every local authority in England to produce an annual local sufficiency plan, which is a clear, forward-looking strategy setting out how they will meet their

duty under section 22G of the Children Act 1989 to secure sufficient accommodation in their area. Thirdly, it would introduce a duty on the Secretary of State for Education to publish a national sufficiency plan after each financial year. That strategy must bring together the data collected from local authorities, and set out what action the Government are taking to support councils in meeting their duties.

That, in my mind, is a sensible, common-sense approach. This Government clearly take their responsibilities in this area seriously, but future Governments may not. This initiative will keep their feet to the fire. Together, those three provisions introduce something that our current system clearly lacks: clarity, co-ordination and accountability. The Bill does not ban distant placements. It rightly makes space for cases where distance is necessary, whether for safety, for therapeutic care or for stability. There needs to be flexibility in the system.

I am pleased to be joined in the Gallery today by Georgia and Kane, two care-experienced young people whose courage and insight continues to shape this debate. In fact, this Bill would not be before the House if it were not for them and many of their friends and colleagues who have campaigned so passionately on this issue. Their stories are vital, because behind every placement statistic, every sufficiency plan and every consultation document, there are real lives shaped by the decisions that the Government make and that we make in this place.

Kane, at just 16 years old, was moved from his foster home near Kingsteignton to supported accommodation far away in Exmouth. The move separated him from his twin sister and left him feeling alone and invisible. Georgia's journey meant that she moved multiple times while in care and spent extended periods in mental health hospitals as a teenager, often far from home. She recently told the Education Committee how she had to be declared homeless in order to access the support she needed near to her networks. She described a kinship placement that offered love, stability and safety, but that broke down because her carers received no formal support. She was left navigating high-risk supported accommodation alone, often living alongside people experiencing exploitation and with serious mental health needs, all while trying to complete her A-levels.

**Liam Conlon** (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend welcome the Government's important changes, including the support from local authorities, for kinship carers, such as those I met in Beckenham and Penge?

**Jake Richards:** My hon. Friend makes an important point. I know that the Government and the Minister take kinship carers and the care system very seriously, and the Government have introduced a number of measures already. That is very welcome in their first 12 months—it emphasises just how seriously they take these matters—and it is part of the strategy of solving this problem of distance placements. When children can stay in the family, they should.

**Mr James Frith** (Bury North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the register of children that is being introduced through the Children's Wellbeing and Schools

Bill is a start to what he is advocating? Knowing exactly where children are at any given point would be a healthy start for us.

**Jake Richards:** Absolutely—that is one of the most welcome measures in that Bill, introduced to this Parliament in its first Session. Data can be quite a boring topic, but it is so important, because it allows everyone—including this place, journalists and campaign organisations—to hold the Government's feet to the fire and hold them to account. While it may seem a dry and conservative development, that register could be really important in making sure we have as much information about what is going on as we can, in particular for children in care, who so often are voiceless. We need to make sure their voices are heard. For every Georgia and Kane who find the strength and platform to speak, as I was just talking about, there are countless others whose experiences remain unheard—young people moved from their home with no explanation, no warning and no real choice. Georgia and Kane are remarkable campaigners, and now it is our duty to respond, not with sympathy alone but with serious structural reform. I hope that this Bill can help form part of that response.

**Ellie Chowns** (North Herefordshire) (Green): The hon. Member is making a very powerful speech, and I echo his point about the voices of young people themselves being heard in these debates. I hope that the Minister will look kindly on the opportunity to introduce the measures in this Bill, perhaps by adding them to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill in the Lords. However, does the hon. Member agree that we are spending more and more on taking children into care because we are failing them and their families early on? In addition to the measures in his Bill, does he agree that we need to invest more in supporting children and families earlier, so that fewer children end up being taken into care in the first place?

**Jake Richards:** Absolutely. Care should always be the last resort, and later in my speech I will speak about the false economy of spending billions of pounds on a care system that is failing children—most importantly—but also the taxpayer and everyone else. Early intervention is absolutely critical, so I completely agree with the hon. Member's point.

How have we got to this stage where, as I have just touched on, the system is failing in so many different aspects? The reasons are complex. Too often, distant placements simply reflect a chronic lack of local provision, with a market-driven care system unable or unwilling to provide safe, nurturing homes close to where children live. As we have heard, the result is thousands of children being let down by a failing system.

One of the most significant contributions to the Government's Bill, and indeed to our understanding of the whole system, was the independent review of children's social care led by my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister). That review laid bare a system that is under immense strain, one in which the needs of children are too often shaped by market forces and a postcode lottery rather than what is in the best interests of those children, which is what the Protection of Children Act 1978 requires and should shape all Government policy.



[Jake Richards]

My hon. Friend's review could not have been clearer: too many children are being placed far from home. It called for a fundamental reset—a shift from a reactive, fragmented care system to one grounded in early intervention, as the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Ellie Chowns) has advocated for, with strong relationships and homes that are local, loving and stable. It warned of a dangerous reliance on large private providers, many of which operate with little accountability and at high cost. We could have a whole separate debate about the extortionate costs of private companies in the care system and the profits they are making on the backs of desperate local authorities. That review also made a powerful case for rethinking the way in which we plan for care, arguing that the absence of a joined-up national approach has left too many children at risk of instability, isolation and, in some cases, real harm.

We know from councils that the crisis in placement sufficiency is leaving them with little choice. They face a dire shortage of foster carers, especially those trained to provide therapeutic support, and they are locked in bidding wars with other local authorities, or priced out by private providers demanding fees that would make even a well-resourced system buckle. If the state is going to remove a child from their family and their community—an enormous, draconian power and responsibility—the least it can do is ensure that every child does not lose everything else in the process. We must not only protect children, but nurture them; we must provide not just safety, but stability. I hope that the Bill lays the groundwork for that ambition. It would ensure that we do not just talk about sufficiency but plan for it. It would ensure that we treated data not as a bureaucratic requirement, but as the foundation of good care, and it would ensure that Parliament played a role in scrutinising the system, rather than simply reacting to its failures.

The Bill would not ban distance placements, because, as I have touched on, there will always be cases where a child must be moved, but it says firmly that they should never be the default. Placements should never be driven by gaps in provision, lack of planning or market dysfunction, and the Government must take a leading role in changing the care system.

As I have said, I welcome the legislation going through Parliament, and I applaud the Education Secretary, and in particular the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby), who is in her place, for putting children in care front and centre of the Government's agenda. That has not happened for many decades; many Governments of different colours have failed to properly grasp the issue, but I am pleased that the Government are doing so. However, I urge them to go further. I fear that some measures and ambitions will be lost if we do not ensure that the care estate in every locality improves its capacity.

The Department has a wide array of challenges, and this is a particularly difficult one, but the Bill, which would be essentially cost-neutral, would keep the focus on the agenda without placing too much responsibility on local authorities. The Government know that, yes, they must work in partnership with local authorities, but they must also take strategic decisions about where provision is needed, how it is funded and how we ensure that market dynamics do not dictate children's futures.

I want to be clear that none of this speech is about blaming councils or local authorities, many of which are doing their level best under enormous financial constraints, and are firefighting in a system in which the odds are stacked against them. I hope that this modest Bill can give them the tools that they need to plan, build and provide, rather than simply outsourcing and hoping for the best.

The Bill would change expectations by restoring proximity as the norm, and placing the burden of justification on those who propose to go against that norm. If it were our children, we would expect them to stay close to home and their community, where they feel safe. We would expect a proper plan. Ultimately, that is all the Bill asks of the Government. The children in our care system deserve nothing less. For that reason, I commend the Bill to the House.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** As there are no further Back-Bench speakers, I call the shadow Minister.

2.17 pm

**Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con):** I am pleased to contribute to this important debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Rother Valley (Jake Richards) on bringing the Bill before the House. I commend him for shining a spotlight on an issue that affects some of the most vulnerable children in the country. These children are not simply statistics or case numbers; they are young people who have experienced trauma, instability and, in many cases, loss. It is essential that they get the loving home and the support that they deserve, so that they can flourish. He has brought this issue to the House with compassion and care, and I commend him for doing so.

As a serving Surrey county councillor and a former member of the corporate parenting board, this is an issue close to my heart, too. I have seen at first hand many of the challenges and systemic failings that have been talked about. As was set out, local authorities have a duty, so far as reasonably practicable, to ensure that looked-after children are placed in accommodation that meets their needs in the local area, but many local authorities fail to achieve that, and often shockingly high numbers of children are placed out of area.

I am sure that the inclusion of the words, “so far as reasonably practicable” was intended to give some leeway to local authorities where needed, and to recognise that sometimes distance placements are in the best interests of the child. However, I am afraid that in far too many cases those words have become a licence for abject failure. Yes, I accept that there are many challenges for local authorities in meeting their duties, including the higher cost of living, which makes it difficult to recruit and retain foster carers; the increased national demand for placements; and even the recent ban on using unregulated accommodation for 16 and 17-year-olds. Those pressures are real, but it is unacceptable that high numbers of looked-after children are being placed in accommodation far away from the communities that they know—far from their schools, their extended family and their support networks.

Such placements are often made not because they are seen as the best option for the child, but because there is simply nowhere else to put them. The problem is that it becomes almost normal to send high numbers of children out of area, so it becomes more acceptable. I am here to say that, except in specific cases, it is not acceptable. Local authorities and national Government need to do more to ensure that the sufficiency duty is met. The wellbeing and safety of these vulnerable children depend upon it.

The damaging consequences of these long-distance placements are obvious. Children placed miles away are more likely to experience educational disruption, go missing and lose contact with friends, siblings and trusted adults. In some cases, the sense of being cut adrift from everything familiar only deepens an already present feeling of abandonment. It should be noted that these placements are often beyond the local authority boundary, giving rise to myriad further risks.

It is self-evident that the system needs further intervention, and I am pleased that any policy decisions taken in the future will build on the major reforms introduced by the previous Conservative Government. Perhaps the most impactful reform in this space was the introduction of the staying put policy in 2014, which allowed young people in foster care to remain with their foster family until the age of 21. That was a transformational step. For the first time, young people in care were offered the stability and ongoing familial support that many of their peers take for granted.

It was also the previous Conservative Government who rolled out regional adoption agencies, which are designed to reduce delays in the adoption process and increase the number of children finding permanent, loving homes. Since their introduction, adoption timeliness has improved, and agencies have been better able to match children with prospective parents across wider geographical areas.

We also published our strategy and consultation, “Children’s Social Care: Stable Homes, Built on Love”. Our strategy was backed initially by £200 million of additional investment over two years to transform children’s social care, including by delivering a decisive multi-agency child protection system and ensuring that every child has a valued, supported and highly-skilled social worker when needed.

Finally, the publication of the independent review of children’s social care in 2022, commissioned by the last Government, was a landmark moment. It provided a comprehensive and honest assessment of the system’s challenges, and offered a road map for reform focused on early intervention, family help and a more relational, less transactional model of care. Those milestones, taken together, demonstrate that we have always taken the needs of looked-after children seriously, and we will continue to work constructively alongside Government Members to improve the support available to these children; I know Government Members have the same overarching objective of transforming life outcomes for these children.

I return to the Bill. The ambition of improving the transparency of data about placements of looked-after children is much welcomed. The Bill would place a duty on local authorities to publish such information, making it easier to identify where there are issues, and where local authorities are not performing. We will start to see

tangible improvement only when the extent of the issue nationally is clearly laid out. As is often the way, measurement prompts improvement.

Undoubtedly, one of the most consequential aspects of the Bill is the requirement for the Secretary of State to produce a national sufficiency strategy for looked-after children. Local authorities can and should do more to collaborate at regional level to ensure that children are put in placements close to their homes, but the structural challenges faced likely cannot be solved by local government alone. National leadership is essential, and I urge Ministers to look seriously at how best to increase placement capacity where there are shortages, and at how to ensure that the right children end up in the right locations, not just the cheapest locations.

That is not to say that local authorities are not at the heart of this challenge—they are—but I know that they find it increasingly difficult. The residential care market is now heavily dominated by private providers, and the cost of placements continues to rise, placing a huge strain on local authority budgets. A shift to a more strategic approach is needed, and I recognise that the hon. Member for Rother Valley has sought to kick-start that shift with the requirement in his Bill for local sufficiency strategies to be published by local authorities in England.

At this point, I should acknowledge that for all the justifiable talk today against distance placements, there is a very limited set of circumstances in which they are appropriate and necessary. Some children need specialist provision that simply does not exist locally. Others may need to be placed at a distance to ensure their safety if they have become involved with gangs or are threatened by an abuser. The question is not whether distance placements should be banned—they should not—but how we can get to a point where they are used only when it is truly and demonstrably in the best interests of the child.

A key focus is how we recruit, retain and support foster carers, and how we encourage local authorities to invest in local residential provision at a time of such pressure on their budgets. Many of the answers lie in not only legislation but funding, training and leadership, both local and national. I look forward to the Minister’s comments on these important issues.

When a child is taken into care, the state becomes their parent. That is not a responsibility to ever be exercised lightly. We must hold ourselves and the systems we put in place to the highest standard—the standard we would expect and demand for our own children. The hon. Member for Rother Valley has brought this Bill forward in precisely that spirit, and I congratulate him once again on doing so. It was truly a pleasure to speak on it.

2.25 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby):** I am pleased that the Bill provides the opportunity to consider the importance of residential children’s homes, and the sufficiency of placements. My hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Jake Richards) will be familiar with the many significant issues that this Government have inherited and are having to resolve in order to fix the foundations, so that we can make a range of reforms across children’s social care. Those

[Janet Daby]

reforms include addressing the underlying issues that contribute to the country's shortage of suitable placements for children in care. I share my hon. Friend's concerns about the important issues raised in his Bill, and agree that changes are needed to help local authorities better meet the needs of the children in their care.

Reforming children's social care is critical to giving hundreds of thousands of children and young people the start in life that they deserve. In November, we published "Keeping children safe, helping families thrive," which set out our approach. As my hon. Friend will be aware, the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill is progressing through the other place. Our reforms will help to ensure opportunity for not just some but all children. Our approach to reform will break down barriers by shifting the focus in children's social care to early support, early help and early intervention, so that we can keep families together and children safe. Our plans will help to ensure that children can remain with their families, where that is in their best interests, and will support more children so that they can live with kinship carers or in foster families, and we will fix the broken care market to tackle profiteering and put children's needs first.

Before I turn to the Bill, I want to put on record that I am clear that a child should be placed far away from their home only when that is in their best interests. In the current system, however, a lack of availability of suitable local placements is too often the deciding factor for too many children, who end up being placed in care far away from their home and community. This situation may have been acceptable under the previous Government, but it is not acceptable to this one. We must change it, and we will. We are already working with local authorities to do so. I have met many campaign groups, and have spoken to young people and professionals about this specific area of change.

Local authorities have an existing duty to collect data on out-of-area placements. Since becoming Minister, I have come to realise that this data is actually published every year. The proposals in this Bill are therefore unlikely to tell us anything new about local authority sufficiency that will help. The data tells us that as of 31 March 2024, more than two thirds of children were placed less than 20 miles from their home, but that 45% of children were placed outside their local authority boundary. That is not good enough. However, the statistics cover many situations where a placement further away was in the child's best interests, and where that was part of the care plan, rather than it being due to local insufficiency.

I absolutely agree that bold action is needed to improve sufficiency, but the variety and complexity of children's needs and their individual situations mean that we cannot always easily categorise distance placements as inappropriate. Local authority staff work hard to find placements in really challenging situations. If a placement is found that best meets a child's needs, but it is some distance away, the issue will be ensuring the child's safety and wellbeing, and ensuring that contact is sustained, where that is appropriate. Furthermore, requiring national Government to publish sufficiency plans misunderstands the way that duties and funding operate in this space, and risks creating confusion. Responsibility sits at local authority level and it is not for national Government to assess the levels or types of need in each area, or how that need is best met.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley's Bill includes proposals for—

2.30 pm

*The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 11(2)).*

*Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 11 July.*



## Business without Debate

### HOMELESSNESS PREVENTION BILL

*Bill read a Second time; to stand committed to a Public Bill Committee (Standing Order No.63)*

### DOMESTIC BUILDING WORKS (CONSUMER PROTECTION) BILL

*Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 13 June.*

### EXEMPTION FROM VALUE ADDED TAX (LISTED PLACES OF WORSHIP) BILL

*Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 April.*

### EXEMPTION FROM VALUE ADDED TAX (MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS) BILL

*Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 April.*

### CARAVAN SITE LICENSING (EXEMPTIONS OF MOTOR HOMES) BILL

*Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 April.*

### VEHICLE REGISTRATION DOCUMENTS (SALE OF VEHICLE) BILL

*Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 5 September.*

### NURSE (USE OF TITLE) BILL

*Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 20 June.*

### WOMEN'S STATE PENSION AGE (OMBUDSMAN REPORT AND COMPENSATION SCHEME) BILL

*Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 4 July.*

## ARM'S-LENGTH BODIES (REVIEW) BILL

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** Owing to an error in the Public Bill Office and through no fault of the Member in charge, this Bill was originally printed with an incorrect title and appeared incorrectly on the Order Paper for Friday 14 March. It has now been reprinted with the correct text. The corrected version of the Bill is available online and in the Vote Office.

*Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 April.*

### PUBLIC HEALTH (CONTROL OF DISEASE) ACT 1984 (AMENDMENT) BILL

*Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 April.*

### STATUTORY INSTRUMENTS ACT 1946 (AMENDMENT) BILL

*Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 April.*

### DANGEROUS DOGS ACT 1991 (AMENDMENT) BILL

*Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 April.*

### DOMESTIC ENERGY (VALUE ADDED TAX) BILL

*Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 April.*

### BBC LICENCE FEE NON-PAYMENT (DECriminalISATION FOR OVER-75S) BILL

*Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 April.*

### QUANTITATIVE EASING (PROHIBITION) BILL

*Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 April.*

**PETS (MICROCHIPS) BILL**

*Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 April.*

**COVID-19 VACCINE DAMAGE PAYMENTS BILL**

*Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 April.*

**ANONYMITY OF SUSPECTS BILL**

*Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 April.*

**CHILDREN'S CLOTHING  
(VALUE ADDED TAX) BILL**

*Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 April.*

**HIGHWAYS ACT 1980 (AMENDMENT) BILL**

*Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 April.*

**BRITISH BROADCASTING CORPORATION  
(PRIVATISATION) BILL**

*Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 April.*

**ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION (OFFENCES) BILL**

*Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 April.*

**VACCINE DAMAGE PAYMENTS ACT  
(REVIEW) BILL**

*Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 April.*

**NHS ENGLAND (ALTERNATIVE  
TREATMENT) BILL**

*Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 April.*

**TERMINAL ILLNESS (RELIEF OF PAIN) BILL**

*Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 April.*

**COVID-19 VACCINE DAMAGE BILL**

*Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 April.*

**MARRIAGE (PROHIBITED DEGREES  
OF RELATIONSHIP) BILL**

*Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 18 July.*

**MOBILE HOMES ACT 1983  
(AMENDMENT) BILL**

*Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 April.*

**SENTENCING COUNCIL (POWERS  
OF SECRETARY OF STATE) BILL**

*Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 April.*

**ARM'S-LENGTH BODIES (ACCOUNTABILITY  
TO PARLIAMENT) BILL**

*Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.*

**Hon. Members:** Object.

*Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 25 April.*

## Down Syndrome Act 2022: Local Authority Guidance

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

2.38 pm

**Jack Rankin** (Windsor) (Con): I feel so strongly about the subject of this debate because of one particular campaigner in my constituency, Millie-Anna. Her commitment to raising awareness and campaigning on a range of issues for people with Down syndrome is inspiring. She is a leading light for people with this condition everywhere.

The main thing I have learned from my discussions with Millie since becoming her Member of Parliament is that, when making policy that affects people with Down syndrome, the best thing that the Government can do is listen to those who actually live with it, as well as their families and groups such as the National Down Syndrome Policy Group. That is why I put in for this debate today: to urge the Minister and her Department to listen to groups such as the all-party parliamentary group on Down syndrome and the National Down Syndrome Policy Group, and to make publishing the Down Syndrome Act guidance, which this Parliament has compelled the state to do, a Government priority. The guidance is essential for making sure that those with Down syndrome are treated with the respect and dignity that they deserve across a range of public bodies—from the NHS and the school system to other local authority services such as housing. If done well, it could set the gold standard for publishing other guidance for those with unique conditions.

Importantly, the guidance must be specific to the unique needs of those with Down syndrome. People with Down syndrome may sometimes have learning disabilities, but Down syndrome is not a learning disability. In my view, the civil servants are seeking an easy life by mopping up the issue with everything else, but that is not what Parliament has told them to do. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care rightly called out NHS England as a public body that served the institution rather than patients and the instructions of this House, but frankly, when it comes to this matter, the Minister needs to look at the Department of Health and Social Care itself.

In the Department's call for evidence, it was mooted that the guidance could be extended to cover those with broader learning disabilities. That was never the purpose of the Act and risks watering down the legislation so far as to make it meaningless, particularly given that the call for evidence also made it clear that the needs of those with Down syndrome are distinct. The extension of the guidance would undermine the Act's whole reason for being. Will the Minister commit to separating learning disabilities from the guidance completely and instead add a supplementary document? That would be a way of pleasing all interested parties without watering down the guidance.

Currently, only 25% of those with Down syndrome are included in mainstream secondary schools. Some 94% are unemployed, and sadly their life expectancy is just two thirds that of the general population. If we provide authorities with specific guidance, I really believe

that we can move the dial and that those with Down syndrome can play a full role in society and be afforded the opportunities that they deserve.

Specific guidance has the power to improve health outcomes by directing NHS professionals, and it will improve school outcomes, as it will stop those with Down syndrome from automatically being pushed towards specialist schools when they may benefit from being in the mainstream. As part of that, I hope that the Minister will be able to confirm that professionals delivering services to people with Down syndrome will have to undertake Down syndrome-specific training and that that will be included in the forthcoming guidance.

The publication date for the draft guidance has faced multiple delays; the most recent extension—that it should be published by Easter—has been postponed yet again. The new target is set for the summer. Sir Liam Fox's Act got on to the statute book as far back as 2022, but still families are left waiting. I say it again: Parliament has given its instruction and the relevant officials should get on with it. Unfortunately, today is just the latest in a long list of debates, questions and letters from the all-party parliamentary group and the National Down Syndrome Policy Group, which time and again have been brushed aside and ignored.

Following the passing of the Act, each integrated care board in England has been required to have a board-level executive lead for Down syndrome, who is accountable for ensuring that the ICB meets its duties and supports people with Down syndrome effectively, including implementing the Down Syndrome Act 2022. However, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) pointed out last week in his Westminster Hall debate, there are currently only three listed leads for the 42 ICBs in England. Progress has been far too slow in all these areas. That, frankly, is an affront to the democratic process and reflects badly on this country.

Although I recognise the difficulties in transitioning from one Government to the next, I feel strongly that this issue needs to be at the top of the list of the Minister's priorities. This is about a binding statute and it is really not a party political matter. Even when submitting my application for this debate to the Table Office, my original wording was flagged because the commitments were officially made under the previous Government. I am sure that that was some kind of administrative confusion, but will the Minister commit to the official record that bringing the guidance forward is also a policy of this new Government?

When Sir Liam's Act was passed, it was a landmark piece of legislation. It gave so much hope to families across the country and sent the message that their campaigning and hard work had been rewarded but, as is so often the case, MPs now face an ongoing battle with the grinding Whitehall machine.

As well as specific guidance being necessary, the Act creates accountability in public institutions. I am afraid that the Minister's officials are again dragging their feet in their own self-interest. They have never wanted to set the precedent that the public could find someone accountable and responsible for their care. God forbid anybody in the British state should be held accountable, but Parliament has legislated to give instructions, and I want my constituents with Down syndrome to know who is responsible for their care.



[Jack Rankin]

In getting on with it and properly capturing people's unique needs in the specific guidance, the Government need to engage with the right people. However, of the key stakeholder groups tasked with developing this guidance, only three of the 11 organisations involved are specifically focused on Down syndrome and are expert in the condition.

Furthermore, the civil service has admitted in correspondence that it is unsure of the specific needs of those with Down syndrome. This is understandable, but why not listen to those who do understand, those who are part of the community and the Down syndrome APPG? Why not listen to people like Millie Anna?

The APPG and the NDSPG have been pushing for a meeting for six months, and I am afraid to say that each time they have been rebuffed with a generic response. I hope that my raising this issue today, following last week's debate secured by my right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness, will be the wake-up call the Government need to take this issue seriously.

Sir Liam has contacted the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee to request an inquiry into this ongoing issue and to explore the reasons for the delays in the publication of the guidance. This is something I wholeheartedly support. From my discussions with the APPG, I know it has found that the Minister's response to last week's Westminster Hall debate left many unanswered questions, so I hope that bringing this topic back to Parliament today has given the Minister a chance to develop her response.

I am afraid to say it is also notable that the Minister responsible for this area of policy has been absent from both this debate and last week's debate, and I would be grateful if the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton), will pass on my asks.

Given the delay and the treatment of the Down syndrome community, which has been far from ideal, I now think that a meeting with the Secretary of State is required to reassure those with Down syndrome that the Government have not forgotten them. Will the Minister commit today to arranging such a meeting in the very near future?

We need to get this guidance published as a priority, but only if it reflects the true intentions of Sir Liam's original Bill—specific to Down syndrome and with proper accountability. I thank the Minister for making the time today. I look forward to her response on all these issues, particularly on: arranging a meeting; separating learning disabilities from Down syndrome in the guidance; the current lack of ICB leads; and a timeline for the publication of the guidance associated with the Act.

2.47 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton):** I thank the hon. Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin) for securing this debate on such an important topic. I am also grateful to him for his work with the all-party parliamentary group on Down syndrome.

People with Down syndrome should have the same opportunities to participate fully in society like everyone else, but we know this does not always happen. There is

a pressing need to raise awareness of the needs of people with Down syndrome and how they can be met. While every person with Down syndrome is a unique individual, they often face common health risks.

For example, we know that almost half of children with Down syndrome are born with a heart condition. We also know that people with Down syndrome may need additional support with their speech, hearing or vision. And as the average life expectancy of a person with Down syndrome continues to rise—an increase I am very pleased to see—this means that more people require additional support in later life. This may be additional support with new, age-related health needs, as well as increased demand for social care services.

This Government are committed to ensuring that all people with Down syndrome receive the care and support they need to lead the lives they want in their communities, and we are taking action to achieve that by implementing the Down Syndrome Act. The Act lays the foundations to ensure that every person with Down syndrome can live a full and fulfilling life through accessing the health and care services they need, receiving the right education, securing appropriate living arrangements that work for them, and being supported into employment. We recognise that there is still much to do to achieve that, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman and the House that the Government are working on the implementation of the Act as a priority.

The Down Syndrome Act requires the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to give guidance to relevant authorities in health, social care—including local authorities—education and housing services on what they should be doing to meet the needs of people with Down syndrome. Earlier this month, Minister Kinnock wrote to sector partners and the all-party parliamentary group on Down syndrome with an update on the development of the guidance, including the Government's plan to put the guidance out for consultation by the summer. That followed a roundtable on 26 November, which Minister Kinnock—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** Order.

**Ashley Dalton:** Oh, sorry!

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Twice!

**Ashley Dalton:** I'm so sorry!

That followed a roundtable on 26 November, which the Minister for Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberafan Maesteg (Stephen Kinnock) convened to discuss with partners how we can improve life outcomes for people with Down syndrome and the opportunities that the guidance presents in support of that.

We appreciate that many of the issues that have been raised are borne out of a desire to ensure the guidance is as effective as possible and published as soon as possible. We know just how important the guidance is. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that a huge amount of work has been, and continues to be, carried out to develop the guidance. And we, like others, want to make sure the guidance is fit for purpose and impactful.

It has been vital that people with lived experience, and the organisations that work to support them, are involved at every stage of the work to develop the guidance.

A range of sector engagement has taken place. That includes a national call for evidence, partner working groups, and a review of evidence to gain a better understanding of the specific needs of people with Down syndrome. Throughout the process, there have been differences in opinion on the scope of the guidance and how it should be drafted. Officials have worked hard to build consensus on these issues, but, as I am sure Members can appreciate, it is not always possible to resolve differing opinions quickly, especially on a topic as important as this. While that means the development of the guidance has taken longer than we all had hoped, it is only right that the issues are given the due consideration they deserve. The Minister responsible set out his position on the issues at hand in his recent letter to sector partners.

Our position remains that the guidance will be Down syndrome-specific, in accordance with the Government's statutory duty under the Act. It is our intention to include references to where the guidance could have wider benefit. That is in line with the commitment made during the Bill's passage through Parliament. This is not about moving the focus away from Down syndrome. The guidance is about meeting the needs of people with Down syndrome. It is about taking the opportunity, through the guidance, to help as many people as possible. Officials will continue to work with partners to ensure the guidance has the maximum benefit for all communities involved.

I can confirm to the hon. Gentleman that I have today secured a commitment that the Minister will work with sector partners to ensure that people with Down syndrome have direct access to, and are supported in taking part in, the consultation.

I would like to thank the individuals and organisations across the country who have worked tirelessly to help us develop the guidance. Their contributions have been invaluable throughout, and we appreciate their continued patience while we work to finalise the guidance for consultation. We would also welcome their support to ensure that the communities they represent are aware of the consultation and can share their views.

We are grateful to members of the all-party parliamentary group on Down syndrome for their engagement and can assure them that their comments on the guidance have been considered throughout the development process. The Minister in charge wrote to the APPG on 18 March. Officials will share a second draft of the guidance with sector partners for feedback in the coming weeks. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I will pass on his comments to the Minister responsible, as requested.

On specific training, under existing legislation, Care Quality Commission-registered providers must ensure that staff receive the appropriate professional development necessary for them to carry out their duties, and must receive specific training on learning disability and autism appropriate to their role. We expect that providers should be considering whether specific training on Down syndrome is required for their staff. Officials will work with stakeholders to signpost that effectively in the guidance we are developing under the Down Syndrome Act.

I thank again the hon. Gentleman for securing this important debate.

*Question put and agreed to.*

2.54 pm

*House adjourned.*





# Written Statement

*Friday 28 March 2025*

## TRANSPORT

### Third Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood):** On 12 February we announced almost £300 million of funding for walking, wheeling and cycling schemes in 2024-5 and 2025-6. This will deliver 300 miles of brand new pavements and cycle

routes to enable 30 million more journeys by walking and cycling every year. It will lead to 43,000 less sick days a year, to ease pressure on the NHS.

The second phase of the spending review is now under way, and the Government will set out our spending plans for future years, including funding for walking, wheeling and cycling, later in the spring.

I am today informing Parliament of my intention to publish a third cycling and walking investment strategy following the conclusion of the spending review. This will allow us to say more on the long-term funding for active travel, as required by the Infrastructure Act 2015. The Government will consult on CWIS3 with relevant stakeholders ahead of its publication.

[HCWS564]



# WRITTEN STATEMENT

Friday 28 March 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>
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**not later than  
Friday 4 April 2025**

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