

Tuesday
22 April 2025

Volume 765
No. 124



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Tuesday 22 April 2025

House of Commons

Tuesday 22 April 2025

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we begin, I am sure the whole House will wish to join me in remembering the life and service of His Holiness Pope Francis. He was both a humble man and a charismatic leader who was unafraid to confront some of the greatest challenges facing the world. He will be deeply missed by those of all faiths around the world, and in particular our thoughts are with members of the Roman Catholic community throughout the United Kingdom as they mourn his passing.

Oral Answers to Questions

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Female Offenders

1. **Dr Allison Gardner** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to support female offenders. [903755]

8. **Satvir Kaur** (Southampton Test) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to support female offenders. [903764]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): This Government's plan to support women is clear and ambitious. The aim is to reduce the number of women going to prison, and our Women's Justice Board will lead on this. Following Susannah Hancock's review, which was published in March, this Government have acted to prevent girls from being held in young offenders institutions.

Dr Gardner: I have been very concerned to hear first-hand reports of female prisoners being handcuffed during childbirth, sometimes to male officers. Does the Minister agree that there should be an independent investigation into the use of birth cuffing in women's prisons across the country that consults all women who have been or may be affected?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: My hon. Friend refers to a shocking situation. Our policy is clear that pregnant women should not be restrained during hospital appointments, except in the most exceptional circumstances. There is an ongoing deep-dive review taking place into matters at HMP Bronzefield, commissioned by the prisons Minister in the other place.

Satvir Kaur: I thank the Minister for his response. In my constituency, Hope Street is doing incredible work to offer residential alternatives to custody for women. We know that this model reduces the number of women being sent to prison, preventing separation from their children, who are likely to be taken into care, which we all know has a hugely detrimental impact. Can the Minister share any plans to replicate and scale up the Hope Street model?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I agree with my hon. Friend that for some women supported accommodation is very valuable. Existing provision includes His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service-led community accommodation services and third sector residential women's centres, including Hope Street, which she rightly praises for its excellent work. The Women's Justice Board is exploring options to increase use of robust community alternatives to custody, including residential options where appropriate.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Project SHE in Somerset, run by the Nelson Trust, allows some women who have been arrested for the first time for low-level crime an alternative to court, working with offenders on rehabilitation and reducing the impact on the community and the criminal justice system. What support is the Department providing for such schemes?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: These schemes are very important. The hon. Member highlights a very good one, and the Department continues to support those sorts of schemes.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): Does the Minister agree that counselling services are crucial in supporting female offenders as they address trauma, addiction and mental health challenges? Furthermore, will she join me in commending the charity uHub in my constituency for its exceptional counselling services for young women?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The hon. Member mentions an excellent counselling service in his constituency, which I praise. These counselling services are crucial and a very important part of the system.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): It has been six days since the Supreme Court handed down its landmark judgment in the case brought by For Women Scotland—a judgment that confirms basic biological reality and protects women and girls. It was a Conservative Government who brought in the policy to stop male offenders, however they identify, being held in the women's estate, especially those convicted of violence or sexual offences. Will the Lord Chancellor and her Ministers confirm that the Government will implement the Supreme Court judgment in full and that they will take personal responsibility for ensuring that it is in every aspect of our justice system, or do they agree with senior Ministers in their party who now appear to be actively plotting to undermine the Supreme Court's judgment?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: We inherited the current policy on transgender people in the prison service and we have continued the policy that the right hon. Gentleman describes during our period in office. In the light of last week's Supreme Court ruling, the Department is reviewing all areas that could be impacted.

Sentencing Council

2. Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): What assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the Sentencing Council. [903757]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): The Sentencing Council does important work bringing consistency to judicial decision making, but it was clear in recent weeks that it had moved beyond that role to take in policy that is not mine and not the Government's. A review of the role and powers of the Sentencing Council is ongoing and I will legislate further if necessary.

Sir Ashley Fox: Draft guidelines from the Sentencing Council now propose substantially lower sentences for immigration offences than levels agreed by Parliament, so will the Lord Chancellor call on the Sentencing Council to revise those guidelines, so that they align with the time periods agreed by Parliament?

Shabana Mahmood: The guidelines set a starting point for a sentence—that is usually the point of the guidelines. Judges can sentence outside the guideline range if they believe that is in the interests of justice. The guidelines set only a starting point, not an end point, which remains in the purview of judges sitting in their independent capacity in our courts. We are not seeking to overturn the immigration guidelines. In case there are hon. Members who are labouring under misinformation, I should say that it is an important point of fact that foreign national offenders and immigration offenders who receive sentences of less than 12 months can still be deported, and under this Government they will be.

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

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): When it enacted the Coroners and Justice Act 2009, Parliament decided that the Sentencing Council should be chaired by a judicial member, appointed by the Lady Chief Justice. Does the Lord Chancellor agree that Members of this House should respect the principle of judicial independence when discussing the leadership of the Sentencing Council?

Shabana Mahmood: When judges are acting as judges, they are acting in their independent capacity. All Members of this House should respect judicial independence. My hon. Friend will know that my disagreement with the Sentencing Council relates to where the line is drawn between matters that are correctly within the purview of our independent judiciary and matters that relate to policy that is correctly within the purview of this place.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): Today, the Justice Secretary is belatedly introducing a Bill to restore fairness in who receives a pre-sentence report, but it will not correct what the pre-sentence report says. Under brand-new guidance that the Justice Secretary's Department issued in January, pre-sentence reports must consider the "culture" of an offender and take into account whether they have suffered "intergenerational trauma" from "important

historical events". Evidently, the Labour party does not believe in individual responsibility and agency. Instead of treating people equally, it believes in cultural relativism. This time the Justice Secretary has nobody else to blame but herself. Will she change that or is there two-tier justice? Is that the Labour party's policy now?

Shabana Mahmood: What a load of nonsense. I am the Lord Chancellor who is rectifying the situation with the proper distinction between matters of policy and matters of independent judicial decision through the Bill that we will debate on Second Reading later today. I have already dealt with the issues in relation to the immigration guidelines. The right hon. Gentleman has made some comments about that which do not bear resemblance to fact, so perhaps he would like to correct the record. On the bail guidance and on all other guidance that relates to equality before the law, I have said that we are reviewing absolutely everything. I will ensure that under this Government equality before the law is never a principle that is compromised, although it was compromised under the Conservative Government.

Hyper-prolific Offending

3. Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): What steps she is taking through the criminal justice system to help tackle hyper-prolific offending. [903758]

21. Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): What steps she is taking through the criminal justice system to help tackle hyper-prolific offending. [903777]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): This Government inherited a situation where around 10% of offenders account for over half of all convictions. We also inherited rising levels of theft and shoplifting. In February, I announced reforms to the probation service that will focus more of its time on offenders who pose a higher risk of reoffending, and I have asked David Gauke to review how sentences could be reformed to address prolific offending, cut the cycle of reoffending and ultimately make our streets safer.

Blake Stephenson: In my constituency there is a particular problem of hyper-prolific shoplifting. There are no credible deterrents and it is a scourge on our local communities and shop owners. Can the Justice Secretary rule out any possibility of allowing career criminals to avoid prison, even for short sentences?

Shabana Mahmood: First, in the Crime and Policing Bill this Government have removed the effective immunity from prosecution for thefts relating to values under £200, so we are already taking clear, definitive action to deal with the problems that the hon. Gentleman sees in his constituency. I will not pre-empt the findings of the sentencing review. I am interested in how we ensure that those who he correctly described as career criminals turn their back on a life of crime, because in the end that is the best strategy for cutting crime and making our streets safer.

Mr French: Tool theft has a devastating impact on tradespeople and their families across the country. That is why I am pleased to support the shadow Justice

Secretary, Sidcup police, On The Tools, Checktrade and others in tool-marking initiatives and raids at boot sales where stolen goods are normally sold, but there is more to do across the criminal justice system to tackle this issue. Will the Government support Conservative amendments to the Crime and Policing Bill and ensure that these prolific offenders face tougher sentences and tradespeople get the justice they finally deserve?

Shabana Mahmood: I hope the hon. Gentleman will welcome efforts on the Labour Back Benches relating to tool trade; my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) has introduced a private Member's Bill. As I say, I will not pre-empt the findings of the sentencing review, but it is precisely because we take such offending very seriously that I asked the review to consider carefully interventions that will work in ensuring that offenders turn their backs on a life of crime, ultimately helping us to cut the crime that they cause, which creates victims in the process. I know we all want to ensure that that is the case. As far as specific amendments to the Crime and Policing Bill are concerned, I am sure that the Ministers responsible will respond in due course.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Following his engagement, I call Alistair Strathern.

Alistair Strathern: Thank you, Mr Speaker—that is very kind. In less encouraging news, far too many retailers across my towns and villages, including my local Morrisons, are being hit by repeated shoplifting, which is all too often driven by prolific offenders and criminal gangs. How is the Secretary of State working with the Home Office to ensure that we are finally taking the scourge of shoplifting as seriously as we should?

Shabana Mahmood: As I said, we have already removed the effective immunity from prosecution for thefts relating to values under £200, reversing the previous Conservative Government's policy in this area. We will legislate to ensure that assault on a retail worker is a new offence in the Crime and Policing Bill, so we are already taking measures to help my hon. Friend and his constituents with the issues they face. As I say, it is because we take this type of offending particularly seriously that I asked the sentencing review to consider the specifics of prolific offenders.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): Earlier this month, Bovis House in Hartlepool, which hosts a number of businesses, was robbed. The people who did that were so well known that within minutes of the CCTV footage being put on social media, people were messaging me their names. These are hyper-prolific offenders; tiny numbers of people are responsible for huge amounts of crime. Does the Justice Secretary agree that the only solution is to lock them up for longer?

Shabana Mahmood: The solutions we pursue have to be shown to work. In the end, we need solutions that will work, because these people are often locked up for considerable periods of time, and when they come back out they still offend again. For some of those individuals, the problems will relate partly to addiction issues. It is

important that we trial and use methods that help people to cut their addiction and usage in order to stop them committing crimes fuelled by that addiction. As I say, that will need a multi-layered response. I am determined that we will crack down on the scourge of prolific offenders; that is the only strategy for cutting crime, and we are determined to pursue it. We want to have measures that work, which is why I asked the sentencing review to consider them specifically.

Young Offenders: Staffordshire

4. **Adam Jogee** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to support young offenders in Staffordshire. [903759]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): This year, the Department will provide more than £1 million in funding to the Staffordshire youth offending team to supervise children and support them in turning their back on a life of crime.

Adam Jogee: At the election, we promised to take action to reduce youth offending, with a network of Young Futures hubs and a crackdown on antisocial behaviour which causes so much pain to my constituents and to people up and down our country. Criminals must face the full force of the law, and young offenders cannot be a lost cause. Will the Minister confirm that this Government will do whatever we can to divert young people away from a lifetime of crime?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: My hon. Friend is exactly right. We must do whatever we can to move people away from a life of crime and keep the public safe. This year, despite the fiscal challenges we inherited, we are investing more than £100 million in youth offending teams across the country to identify children and divert them away from crime. With turnaround funding, Staffordshire youth offending team delivered skill-building activities for children in antisocial behaviour hotspots during a successful six-week summer programme.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD) *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Are we really sure that this question is linked to young people in Staffordshire committing crime?

Caroline Voaden: It might not be about Staffordshire, but we also have young people in Devon. We have a case in my constituency of a young offender who has been arrested multiple times and put under a court order, but the presumption is against incarceration because of his age. Local residents tell me that there is a disaster waiting to happen—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member is not linking her question to the original, so we are going to move on.

Reoffending: Young People

5. **Dr Jeevun Sandher** (Loughborough) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help reduce levels of reoffending among young people. [903760]

11. **Catherine Atkinson** (Derby North) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help reduce levels of reoffending among young people. [903767]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): The Government are determined to reduce youth reoffending as part of our safer streets mission. Despite the huge fiscal challenges we inherited, we have been able to increase our core funding to youth offending teams across the country, allowing them to support children away from crime.

Dr Sandher: Constituents across my community of Loughborough, Shepshed and the villages have been facing the scourge of offroad bikes, often ridden by young reoffenders. That causes havoc for residents, it is dangerous for pedestrians, and can be fatal for those who are on those bikes. Those young reoffenders often have little else to do, as there are few education, training or employment opportunities, so can the Minister please set out how this Government will end the scourge of offroad bikes and reoffending, and how they will once again be tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: My hon. Friend is exactly right. In the past, antisocial behaviour has been too easily dismissed as low-level, but as he rightly describes, it can cause real distress and misery to our communities. I am pleased that the new Crime and Policing Bill includes measures to enhance police powers to seize nuisance offroad bikes and other vehicles used in an antisocial manner.

Catherine Atkinson: Engineered Learning in Derby teaches welding skills to young people at risk of offending and reoffending. A qualified, experienced welder can earn more than £50,000, yet we have a national shortage of welders. Does the Minister agree that preventing reoffending and securing the skills our country needs is a win-win, and will he look at how we can get more young lives back on track, learning trades such as welding?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: My hon. Friend is exactly right. What Engineered Learning is doing is a clear win-win, teaching welding skills and moving people away from crime. The Department will continue funding youth offending teams to work with local education and employment providers to help young people get the skills they need to have productive careers and positive lives.

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): Aspiration and ambition are drivers of social mobility and help to reduce deprivation and crime. What discussions has the Minister had with the Department for Education to increase apprenticeships and training, so that these opportunities can be extended to all and we can reduce young offending throughout the UK?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: We have regular discussions with the Department for Education on these matters. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: the more young people we get into training, education and work, the less crime we should have on our streets.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for that answer. Quite clearly, those who reoffend do so because they go back to where the peer pressure is, where the unemployment is, and where poverty levels are high. Those are things that must be addressed in order to help these young people not to reoffend. They are big issues; what can be done to ensure those three things in the localities where those young people live do not overtake them, with the problems they have?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that all those issues contribute to circumstances that might create offending, but it is really good that we have the turnaround programme in place. Only 5% of children who completed their turnaround interventions received convictions in their first year of the programme. That is an example of the sort of programme we need to be engaging in to turn young people away from crime.

Legal Aid: Rural Areas

6. **Steff Aquarone** (North Norfolk) (LD): What steps she is taking to increase access to legal aid in rural areas. [903761]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Sarah Sackman): Wherever they are in England and Wales, people should benefit from equal access to legal support and legal aid. Remote technology and provision of online advice present the opportunity both to democratise legal advice and to deliver it to all who need to access it. We are investing an additional £92 million to support the sustainability of the criminal legal aid sector, and we are consulting on fee increases totalling £20 million for housing and immigration to increase access to civil legal aid. All of this will support legal aid across the country, including in rural areas.

Steff Aquarone: North Norfolk is a legal aid desert. My residents have precious little access to family, criminal and housing legal assistance, despite the best efforts of local organisations such as the Norfolk Community Law Service. We face huge barriers to recruitment and retention in rural areas, such as the cost of housing, poor public transport and fees that, despite the uprating, are still too low. Things need to change. Will the Minister meet me and those working in the legal aid sector in North Norfolk to discuss what we can do to support those in need in areas such as mine?

Sarah Sackman: I thank the hon. Member for raising the issue of legal aid deserts, and I welcome his suggestion that he write to me about these things. I regularly meet legal aid providers, and that is why we are investing an additional £6 million in legal support, which provides that early advice that can make a real difference in areas such as his.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Cornwall is a big rural legal aid desert. We have many volunteers who would be prepared to help and Citizens Advice could act as an umbrella organisation. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can get some of that funding for access to legal aid in rural areas into Cornwall?

Sarah Sackman: My hon. Friend is right to raise the importance of early legal support and legal aid. That is why we are investing in online provision. As I have said, remote technology can make a real difference in areas such as hers. Before I came to this place, I volunteered in a free legal advice centre, so I know just how much of a difference such institutions can make.

Domestic Violence: Bail Conditions

7. Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of policies applying to bail conditions in domestic violence cases. [903763]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): This Government have committed to halving violence against women and girls in a decade. A broad range of bail conditions can be imposed to protect victims, including electronic monitoring for those who meet the remand threshold, exclusion zones and non-contact orders. Suspects can also be remanded in prison.

Ellie Chowns: I raise this issue following a meeting with a constituent whose case raises deep concerns that are more widely relevant. First, bail conditions—sometimes weak, sometimes poorly enforced—do not always protect victims of domestic violence from further harassment by their abuser. Secondly, despite the increase in the time limit to two years under the 2022 regulations, the six-month limit for prosecutions means that some cases time out. Will the Minister meet me and my constituent to discuss what more can be done to ensure that victims of domestic abuse are fully protected from their abusers?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank the hon. Member for raising this important issue from her constituency. We know that more needs to be done in this area, and that is why this Government have started to roll out our domestic abuse protection orders to help victims of domestic abuse in selected areas. We are seeing how that goes. We are developing policy in this area to protect victims, and women and girls in particular. I would be more than happy to meet her to discuss what more we can do.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Having spoken to Essex police and other professionals, and having worked for a homeless charity myself, I know that often the hardest part for victims of domestic violence is making the decision to leave what is sometimes the family home. What work has the Minister done with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to address this issue?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important issue. Tackling violence against women and girls is not just a Ministry of Justice problem to fix, but a problem for every Government Department to fix. That is why I have met with my counterparts across the Departments, including in MHCLG, to discuss housing needs. We will be publishing our violence against women and girls strategy later this year, and I look forward to discussing it with him in due course.

Reoffending on Probation

9. Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help reduce levels of reoffending by people on probation. [903765]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): I take this opportunity to recognise the excellent work that our probation staff do day in, day out. Probation is an indispensable part of the criminal justice system, but the service currently faces significant pressures. That is why we will recruit a further 1,300 probation officers by March 2026, invest £8 million in new technology to reduce administrative tasks for officers and focus efforts on reducing reoffending.

Perran Moon: May I take this opportunity to wish you a belated Pask lowen, Mr Speaker?

Reoffenders are among the most socially excluded in society and often experience complex mental health and social issues, including drug and alcohol addiction. We know that perpetually locking them up does not work and costs a fortune. Can the Minister reassure me that he is working with both the Home Office and the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that wraparound detox and rehabilitation support is available, such as that offered by Bosence Farm in Cornwall?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: Yes, I can reassure my hon. Friend. We work with the Department of Health and Social Care and the Home Office to get offenders into treatment at the earliest opportunity, and have increased the use of drug rehabilitation requirements as well as improved links to ensure that prison leavers stay in treatment on release. In 2025-26, the DHSC is providing £310 million in additional targeted grants to enable local authorities, including Cornwall, to improve services.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): Because our prisons are running at about 98% capacity, not only are existing prisoners more likely to reoffend but, sadly, as we allow more prisoners to be released early, more people on probation will do so. Apart from the terrible effect on victims, the Ministry itself estimates that this costs a staggering £18 billion a year in England and Wales. What is the Minister's policy to help reduce reoffending?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: We have only just taken over a system that was struggling under the weight of 14 years of mismanagement, and we are doing our very best to get on top of it. We have set in train an independent sentencing review, and are committed to appointing 1,300 new probation officers by this time next year.

Prison Capacity: Northern Ireland

10. Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): What recent discussions she has had with the Northern Ireland Executive on trends in levels of prison capacity. [903766]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): Ministry of Justice officials regularly meet representatives of the Department of Justice in Northern Ireland, as part of the "Five Nations Forum", to discuss prison capacity. This allows best practice to be shared and emerging issues to be discussed. The

Prisons Minister in the other place knows the Northern Ireland prisons system well, and will be going there later this year to compare notes.

Robin Swann: The Minister has mentioned best practice. The “separated regime” in Northern Ireland prisons gives those who have been committed to prison as a result of paramilitary activities a special kudos, and when they are released they emerge with a certain status. Can the Minister see the inherent dangers of applying such a policy on a wider scale when dealing with people who may have been radicalised while in prison and may, when released, bring the effects of that into a broader section of society?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The hon. Member is right to suggest that we need to learn lessons from wherever they can be learned, and he is right to caution against approaches that might bring about results that people do not wish to see.

Court Backlogs

12. **Zöe Franklin** (Guildford) (LD): What steps she is taking to tackle court backlogs. [903768]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Sarah Sackman): This Government inherited a record rise in court backlogs. The last Conservative Government let down victims of crime, businesses, workers and families, all through their neglect and under-investment. This Government are gripping the crisis: to date we have funded a record high allocation of 110,000 Crown court sitting days for next year, and we are, and intend to be, at or close to the maximum in every jurisdiction. We are fixing the last Government’s mess.

Zöe Franklin: I recently met representatives of the Rape and Sexual Abuse Support Centre in my constituency. They support hundreds of survivors every year through counselling, advice, and carrying out vital prevention work in schools and the wider community, but, as they explained to me, their work is being undermined by a justice system that is in crisis. Trials are routinely delayed, sometimes for up to four years, owing to a chronic shortage of judges, and as a result some victims are considering dropping their cases—not because they do not want justice, but because they cannot cope with such a traumatic experience. That is a gross injustice. I am grateful to the Minister for her answer, but will she expand specifically on how the Government will help to prevent re-traumatisation in the court backlog process, and on how they will continue to fund organisations such as RASASC?

Sarah Sackman: We recognise the traumatic impact of delays in our Crown courts on victims of violence against women and girls and, indeed, victims of all crimes. The best thing we can do for those victims is deliver swifter justice. We will do that not just by spending extra money—which we have done—but through reform, so we have asked Sir Brian Leveson to propose bold and ambitious measures to deliver the swifter justice for which the hon. Member has asked.

Chris Ward (Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven) (Lab): I recently met, in my constituency, two people whose son and daughter-in-law had been brutally killed in June 2023. Nearly two years on, the case has yet to

come to court. It has been delayed five times, and a date in October has now been set. On each occasion, the delays have caused huge anguish to the family. Will the Minister agree to meet me to discuss this matter, and can she tell me what steps the Government are taking to ensure that trials are conducted promptly so that justice can be received by such families?

Sarah Sackman: I am desperately sorry to hear about the case that my hon. Friend describes. Once again, the best thing that we can do for those families, to ensure that they get swifter justice and get their day in court in a timely fashion, is bear down on the Crown court backlog. That is why we are waiting for Sir Brian Leveson to report in the spring, and why we will act promptly on his recommendations.

Private Law Proceedings: Child Safety

13. **Mr Will Forster** (Woking) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to ensure child safety during private law proceedings. [903769]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): The welfare of the child must be the paramount consideration for family courts, which should follow the welfare checklist, as set out in the Children Act 1989. Our new approach to private law proceedings—the pathfinder pilot courts—focuses on problem solving, putting greater emphasis on the voice of the child, but we are acutely aware that more needs to be done.

Mr Forster: The previous Government’s harm panel report stated that there is a crisis in family courts and that they are too pro-parental contact, despite there being concerns about the child’s safety. As with many things under the previous Government, the Conservatives did nothing about the report. Will this Government and the Minister commit to reversing the parental presumption where there are concerns about child abuse?

Alex Davies-Jones: As I have stated, the child’s welfare must be the court’s paramount consideration. The presumption of parental involvement states that a court should

“presume, unless the contrary is shown, that involvement of that parent in the life of the child will further the child’s welfare.”

I take this opportunity to state, however, that that applies only if the parent does not put the child at risk of harm. We will publish our review of the presumption in due course.

Standard Determinate Sentences: Early Release

14. **Rebecca Paul** (Reigate) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the effectiveness of the standard determinate sentences 40% early release scheme. [903770]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): The last Government left our prisons in crisis. We came within days of running out of space entirely, and the emergency release programme was designed to stop that crisis happening. Numbers are rising again, which is why this Government are committed to building 14,000 prison places by 2031,

compared with the 500 that the last Conservative Government added in 14 years, and to reforming sentencing so that we never run out of prison places again.

Rebecca Paul: Last month, the Prisons Minister said that the longest time that an early-released prisoner had been left to wander the streets without an electronic tag was 53 days. However, just over a week ago, it was reported that prisoners have not been tagged for up to 78 days. Can the Secretary of State please clarify this apparent inconsistency?

Shabana Mahmood: We were transparent with the House about the problems with tagging during the second tranche of emergency releases last year. I will ensure that we publish the correct information, and I can write to the hon. Lady with the exact figures, but we have been holding Serco to account, because its performance on its contract has been unacceptable. We have levied fines, and we have said that all options are on the table for any further action that we might need to take.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): One of the dying acts of the last Conservative Government was to shake hands with Serco on an electronic tagging contract that Channel 4's "Dispatches" found was completely inadequate. People with serious convictions were left without tags for days and weeks. Victims and survivors were failed, including survivors of those released early under the SDS40 scheme. What will the Secretary of State do to hold Serco to account for these failures, and to clear up the mess that was fundamentally created by the failures of the last Government?

Shabana Mahmood: The hon. Member is right: this is one of the many difficult inheritances left for us by the previous Conservative Government. The contract with Serco was agreed by the previous Conservative Administration. We acknowledge that the performance of Serco has been unacceptable. We have already been closely monitoring—day by day—its performance and delivery under the contract, and we have imposed fines for poor performance. Some of the issues relating to the SDS40 emergency releases were ultimately dealt with after close oversight by officials and Ministers, and we continue to monitor the contract very closely. As I have said, should further fines or other measures be required, all options are on the table.

Intimate Image Abuse

15. **Matt Turmaine** (Watford) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help tackle intimate image abuse. [903771]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): We are introducing new offences of taking intimate images without consent and installing equipment with intent to commit such offences. We are also criminalising creating deepfake intimate images without consent. I proudly co-chair the violence against women and girls ministerial group, which oversees a cross-Government approach to tackling VAWG, including online abuse.

Matt Turmaine: I thank the Minister for her answer. Sexually explicit deepfakes are a scourge on our society, whether it is young boys in their bedrooms making them of their fellow pupils and teachers, or those who create explicit images of celebrities to order. How will the legislation the Government intend to bring forward on this help victims of this disgusting abuse and punish those who perpetrate it?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. This Government are committed to halving violence against women and girls over a decade, and that includes the horrendous, degrading and humiliating crime of taking intimate images without consent, as well as creating deepfake images without consent. For far too long, these crimes have gone unpunished, with perpetrators allowed to carry this out at will and to cover their sick behaviour under the rules of banter. We will not stand for it: we are legislating, and we are protecting women and girls.

Bail Guidelines

16. **Robbie Moore** (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): If she will have discussions with the HM Prison and Probation Service on the potential merits of reviewing its guidelines on bail. [903772]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): Equality before the law is a cornerstone of our justice system, and my position on this is clear. Later today, this House will debate legislation to overturn guidelines that the last Conservative Government welcomed, and I am not stopping there. I am reviewing current policy, and this guidance is being redrafted as we speak, including on the approach to bail information for courts.

Robbie Moore: After the conviction of eight men for a string of horrendous child rape offences in Keighley, I wish I could stand here and say that justice has been fully served, but I cannot, because two of these men—dual nationals—absconded during their trial, are still evading justice and are known to be abroad. Does the Secretary of State agree that in such serious cases, where dual or foreign nationals are charged with the most grotesque and serious sexual crimes against children, the court should be under a duty to impose stricter bail conditions, including surrendering passports and electronic monitoring, or even to provide no bail conditions, to stop them fleeing the country and evading justice?

Shabana Mahmood: First, I share the hon. Member's outrage over the crimes that were committed in his community, and the fact that two of those individuals have been able to leave the country, and therefore evade the full force of the law and serving their sentence here. He will know that the decision to remand an individual in custody or on bail is solely a matter for the independent judiciary, and courts are already required to consider the likelihood to abscond as part of that decision.

More broadly, courts have the power to impose a broad range of robust bail conditions, including the surrender of passports, electronically monitored exclusion zones and curfews. He knows that I cannot comment on the specifics, because that is a matter for the independent

judge who sat on that case and made that decision, but those are the rules that apply, and I would be happy to discuss that further with him if he wishes.

Prison Reform

17. Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to reform the prison system. [903773]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): We inherited a system in crisis from the previous Government. With prisons over 99% full, we took immediate action to prevent the collapse of the prison system by changing the automatic release point for standard determinate sentences. We are building 14,000 new prison places, and we published our 10-year capacity strategy in December. However, we know that we cannot build our way out of this crisis, which is why we have also launched an independent sentencing review to ensure that we will never run out of places again.

Jessica Morden: As Ministers will know from previous questions about Parc Prison, parents in Newport East have very serious concerns about the welfare of family members there, with worrying reports continuing to emerge in recent months. Can the Minister give an update on any progress being made on prison safety, mental health support and drug interception since Parc has been receiving targeted support?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: Safety in prisons is a key priority, and we are working hard to make prisons as safe as possible. My hon. Friend is right to highlight the concerns at Parc. I have recently visited HMP Parc, as has the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones), and the Prisons Minister in the other place. On that visit, I saw how seriously the director is taking these issues and engaging closely with families on their very real concerns.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): The catastrophic security failure at HMP Frankland has exposed the danger that terrorist prisoners can pose to prison officers and other inmates across the prison estate. Will the independent review also examine the culture of gang-related violence and intimidation that have contributed to such incidents in our prisons?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: There is an ongoing audit of all the review's recommendations. Our thoughts remain with our brave prison officers who were attacked, and with the victims of the Manchester Arena bombing and their families, who are understandably concerned by the shocking events in HMP Frankland. My right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor took immediate action to set a review in place.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Jack Rankin (Windsor) (Con): Personal protective equipment is now worn in all kinds of jobs where people may have to deal with dangerous situations. As Professor Acheson has said, it is

“staggering that frontline police staff working in conditions of far greater peril...are not issued with stab vests capable of stopping an attack with a bladed weapon.”

We should all be ensuring that our prison officers come home safe to their loved ones. Unions have called for this measure, and I can assure the Minister that they have the full support of those on the Opposition side of the House. Will he act—not in two months or six months, but now—to protect prison officers before it is too late?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: That is part of the review that has been announced. My right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor is meeting the Prison Officers Association tomorrow. These things need to be done rightly and properly, and that is what will happen with this Government.

Jack Rankin: I thank the Minister for his answer, but I suggest that this is something we should just get on with—it is common sense. There is a more fundamental issue. Perhaps I can invite the Minister to provide his assessment of the relative threats provided by different ideological extremists in prisons, which may be fuelling such violence. Islamist terror suspects make up the vast majority of MI5's caseload. Do they also make up the majority of radicalising criminals in our prison estate?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: The hon. Gentleman urges us to get on with it. By my reckoning, the Conservative party had 14 years to get on with it. We are getting on with it. We set up the snap review straightaway. *[Interruption.]* “It's not party political,” he says. Well, people might judge that for themselves by listening to the sort of questioning we have had today.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Key agents of reform in our prisons are prison officers. Unlocked Graduates is an amazing scheme that supports the production of prison officers with new innovations, but it has had the rug pulled from underneath its feet, beyond its current cohort. There are mixed accounts of what has happened from different civil servants and other individuals in government. Will the Minister explain exactly what has happened? Why has the contract not worked? Will he sit down with me and Unlocked Graduates to see if we can find a way forward?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I very much praise the work that Unlocked Graduates has done over many years. Unfortunately, when the contract was let previously, Unlocked Graduates was unhappy to progress with the contract. That is the situation. Obviously, these things are very difficult, but I am very happy to meet the hon. Member to discuss matters further.

Legal Aid

18. Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What steps she is taking to increase the provision of legal aid services. [903774]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Sarah Sackman): On prisons, the inheritance was dire; on Crown court backlogs, the inheritance was dire; and on legal aid services, once again the inheritance has been

absolutely dire. This Government are rebuilding the legal aid system for those it serves and those who serve in it. That is why, in December, we announced up to £92 million more a year for criminal legal aid solicitors, on top of £24 million already announced for duty solicitors in police stations. We are also consulting on uplifts, as I said, in housing and immigration legal aid fees, worth an additional £20 million a year—the first increase in civil legal aid fees since 1996.

Dr Huq: The Conservatives left legal aid in a mess, like so many other things, so I welcome the sums the Minister is announcing, but can she assure me that the money will reach Ealing? We have never even had a citizens advice bureau—not in the 10 years I have been the MP, and not in the 50 years I have been on the planet—to refer constituents to. Can she assure us that my constituents can get the access to justice they deserve?

Sarah Sackman: I welcome my hon. Friend's question. The Legal Aid Agency keeps contracts under review to ensure that there is provision right across the country, including in Ealing. As I said earlier, the additional money going into legal support, which includes advice services, such as citizens advice bureaux, law centres and other advice providers, will reach constituents just like hers, both remotely and face to face.

Topical Questions

T2. [903781] **Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): The House will be aware of the attack at HMP Frankland on 12 April. The bravery of the officers involved undoubtedly saved lives, and my thoughts are with them as they recover. I think also of the victims of the Manchester arena bombing and their families, who are understandably outraged. Since the attack, I have suspended access to kitchens in separation centres and close supervision centres. An independent review will ascertain how the incident was able to happen, what more must be done to protect prison staff and, more widely, how separation centres are run, and the prison service will also conduct a snap review of the use of protective body armour. In addition, I can today announce that His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service will trial the use of tasers in our prisons. Wherever we can strengthen our defences to better protect our staff and the public, we will do so.

The horrific attacks in Nottingham on 13 June 2023 cost Barnaby Webber, Grace O'Malley-Kumar and Ian Coates their lives. I pay tribute to their families and the survivors, many of whom are in the Public Gallery today. The Prime Minister promised that we would heed their calls for a public inquiry, and I can today announce that a full statutory inquiry will take place, chaired by Her Honour Deborah Taylor and with the power to compel witnesses. I will place its full terms of reference in the Libraries of both Houses at the earliest opportunity. The inquiry must be thorough in its assessment of the facts and unsparing in its recommendations—that is the very least that we owe those who have lost so much and fought so hard for this moment. I am sure that this House, so often divided, will be united on that at least today.

Gregory Stafford: I associate myself with the Lord Chancellor's comments and extend my sympathies to the families of those who were attacked.

In Bordon, the release of a sex offender to a property near the Hogmoor inclosure—frequently used by young people, families and children—has caused consternation in my constituency. What is the Lord Chancellor doing to ensure that people who have been convicted of sex offences are properly monitored when released into the community? Do our national and local agencies have the resources and powers to ensure that these risks are monitored and the public are kept safe?

Shabana Mahmood: We have robust processes in place to ensure that those offenders can be monitored effectively at both national and local levels and that those monitoring mechanisms are as robust as possible. I will happily look into the case that the hon. Gentleman raises and ensure that he gets a ministerial response.

T4. [903784] **Adam Jogee** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): The Conservatives presided over 14 years of total failure in our justice system. *[Interruption.]* Let me be topical. To restore justice in this country and keep my constituents safe, we cannot just do more of the same; we need more transparency about the time criminals spend in jail, and common-sense sentencing must mean exactly that. How does the Secretary of State think technology can help to make that possible?

Shabana Mahmood: I must caution Conservatives Members against groaning. I appreciate that they might not be proud of their record—I would not be if that was the record I had left behind after leaving government—but groaning shows the contempt in which they hold the public, who have had to suffer the consequences of a truly dire Conservative party legacy. My hon. Friend is right that technology can—and we hope will—provide better solutions to the management and supervision of offenders in the community. I look forward to the sentencing review's findings in that regard.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): I support the Lord Chancellor's decision to commission a full statutory inquiry into the terrible attack in Nottingham. I know it will be welcomed by the families and everyone in the city and across my home county of Nottinghamshire. I fully support her welcome decision.

Greg Ó Ceallaigh is a serving immigration judge who decides asylum and deportation appeals. It took nothing more than a basic Google search to uncover his past comments that the Conservative party should be treated the same way as Nazis and cancer. As a sitting judge, he has publicly supported Labour's plans to scrap the Rwanda scheme and for illegal entry into the United Kingdom to be decriminalised. Does the Lord Chancellor believe this is compatible with judicial impartiality? If not, what does she intend to do about it?

Shabana Mahmood: First, I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his remarks on the new Nottingham inquiry—I am very grateful for his support. I am sure the whole House will want to see the inquiry come to a conclusion as quickly as possible.

I say to the right hon. Gentleman that when people have a complaint to make about judges, they can do so via the well-placed mechanism of the judicial complaints office. If he wishes to make a complaint, he can do so, but what I will not do is indulge in, effectively, the doxing of judges, especially not when they are simply doing their job of applying the law in the cases that appear before them. If there are complaints to be made about judicial conduct, I am sure the shadow Lord Chancellor knows how to go about it.

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I just say that we must be careful about what we do here? We are not meant to criticise judges, and I know that this House would not do so. I am sure that we will now change the topic.

Robert Jenrick: Mr Speaker, it is important that judges and the manner in which they are appointed are properly scrutinised in this House, and I will not shy away from doing so. Helen Pitcher was forced to resign in disgrace as the chair of the Criminal Cases Review Commission after a formal panel found that she had failed in her duties during one of the worst miscarriages of justice in recent memory. But she is still in charge of judicial appointments, despite judges appearing in the media every week for their activism. Her commission has failed to conduct the most basic checks on potential judges, either out of sheer incompetence, or out of sympathy with their hard-left views on open borders. The commission is broken and is bringing the independence of the judiciary into disrepute. How much longer will it take for the Justice Secretary to act and remove the chair of this commission from her position and defend the independence and reputation of the judiciary?

Shabana Mahmood: I am afraid that the shadow Chancellor cannot elide the process for the appointment of judges with a wider attack on the independence of the judiciary. I hope that he will take the admonishment from you, Mr Speaker, and the clear disapprobation of this House to reflect on the way that he is approaching his role. If there are complaints to be made about judicial conduct, there is already a robust process in place for doing so. If the shadow Lord Chancellor wishes to avail himself of that, I am sure that, given how active he is, he will be happy to do so. What is completely improper is to take his position in this House to indulge in a wider attack of the judiciary at a time when we know that judicial security has been compromised—

Mr Speaker: Order. This is the time for topical questions, and we have other Members to get in. Tensions are running high, so let us calm everyone down with a question from Warinder Juss.

T6. [903786] **Warinder Juss** (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): On a recent visit to Featherstone Prison near Wolverhampton, I came across a number of recalled prisoners who were there for minor technical breaches of their probation—sometimes for up to a year. Can the Secretary of State please outline what data is collected on the reasons for prison recalls and how that data then informs policy decisions aimed at reducing unnecessary returns to custody?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): I am happy to write to my hon. Friend on the detail of the data collection and remind him that we have a sentencing review in process that will be looking at all of those things.

T3. [903783] **Robbie Moore** (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): In a single week in Bradford, we have seen council leaders once again reject my calls for a full rape gangs inquiry. An ex-police officer has been threatened with arrest for investigating these horrific crimes, and now a judge is blocking the release of official transcripts from a major rape gang trial in Bradford. Can the Lord Chancellor explain why our justice system is being used to block the truth about these trials?

Shabana Mahmood: It is not appropriate in these difficult cases to misrepresent what the correct position is. The Home Secretary has already set out our position in this House and answered questions on our approach to the grooming gangs issue and the local inquiries. On court transcripts, we are piloting artificial intelligence technology for accuracy so that hopefully in the future we can produce transcripts. At the moment, the costs are prohibitive and the accuracy of the technology that is available is just not there.

T8. [903788] **Sojan Joseph** (Ashford) (Lab): Restricted patients are mentally disordered offenders who are detained in hospital for treatment and are subject to special controls by the Justice Secretary. What additional support is my right hon. Friend's Department providing to help mental health trusts to treat and rehabilitate these patients, so that they can be released from this secure environment in a timely manner?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: My hon. Friend asks a serious and difficult question. The Mental Health Bill, introduced to Parliament last November, aims to stop restricted patients from languishing in hospital unnecessarily, while prioritising public protection and managing any risks. The Department also works closely with clinicians and care teams to make decisions on restricted patients as quickly as possible, in line with the published guidelines.

T5. [903785] **Julia Lopez** (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): Release on temporary licence is denied when people say nasty stuff on Twitter but granted for much more serious crimes. Can the Secretary of State tell me when I can expect a satisfactory reply to an urgent ROTL case that I have already raised with the Prisons Minister and senior civil servants and that affects a grieving family in my constituency?

Shabana Mahmood: I will chase that up this afternoon and ensure that the hon. Member gets a response as quickly as possible. She will know that release on temporary licence is a mechanism that has governor supervision. If people follow the rules in prison, they become eligible for release on temporary licence. If they do not follow the rules, they are not eligible.

Peter Lamb (Crawley) (Lab): Can the Minister give an assessment of the potential merits of restricting triable either-way offences to summary trial, except for sentencing?

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Sarah Sackman): At a time when victims are waiting far too long for their day in court, it is right that we look at all options. We have asked Sir Brian Leveson to consider all options in his review, including the reclassification of some offences to summary only.

T7. [903787] **Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): We should all be really concerned that the Government have quietly abandoned their pledge to hold five local inquiries into grooming gangs. The victims still need justice, the public still need answers, and we still need a full inquiry. In the meantime, can the Minister tell us what specific actions—not just references to AI—her Department is taking to ensure full transparency and public confidence in the cases that do come to court?

Shabana Mahmood: Sentencing remarks are already available for some of those cases. We have a robust judicial system that can handle difficult cases. I have already dealt with concerns about transcripts. The cost of full court transcripts is very prohibitive, which is why we are looking at technological solutions—AI in particular. We have a number of pilots running. The key thing is that we make sure that the transcripts are accurate so that the information put into the public domain reflects what was said and done in the courtroom.

Bambos Charalambous (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): Although the extra sitting days to reduce court delays announced by the Secretary of State are welcome, does the Minister agree that the state of the court estate needs some attention, as some courts are out of action due to disrepair issues?

Sarah Sackman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The other day I visited the Telford justice centre, where one of the courtrooms was out of use because of mould and a leaky roof. The Government are making an additional capital investment of £20 million this year to maintain and restore our buildings so that they can be full and active for use. We are also investing in new court buildings; from Blackpool to the City of London there will be new courts, and they will serve the public well.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): The passing of Pope Francis was a profound loss. Throughout his life, he was a passionate advocate for a justice system that put reconciliation at its heart. With the publication of the independent sentencing review expected imminently, will the Government take this opportunity to move our justice system towards one that contains, in the words of Pope Francis, a “horizon of hope” and reintegration, and will they commit to restorative justice being placed at the heart of our justice system?

Shabana Mahmood: Restorative justice clearly has a role to play, but the principles of our sentencing review, with which I hope Members across the House can agree, are clear: there must always be a prison place available for people who are dangerous and need to be locked up, and we have to do more to help people to turn their back on a life of crime.

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Compared with the same period in 2023, 21% more foreign national offenders have been removed since July 2024 when this Government came into office. May

I congratulate the Lord Chancellor on this achievement and ask what the new funding announced to speed the process up will do to increase the numbers being removed?

Shabana Mahmood: We have already got off to a good start in the deportation of foreign national offenders from our prisons. The new funding will enable more caseworkers to speed up the removal of even more FNOs. I am very pleased that we have seen a higher number deported this year compared to the previous year, when the Conservatives were in office.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): A British mother in my constituency, having fled domestic abuse, faces forced return to Poland to stay with her young children under the Hague convention on the civil aspects of international child abduction. With no knowledge of the local language and no source of income there, she risks either dependence on her abuser or homelessness. That is because the convention ignores the issue of domestic abuse, allowing it to be manipulated by abusers. Would Ministers support my Bill on the Hague abduction convention and domestic abuse, which I will present soon and which would change the implementation of the Hague convention in UK domestic law to protect mothers from the threat of return in this way?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): I will happily meet the hon. Member to discuss her Bill and tackle this issue head on.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Justice Secretary for the announcement she made today and the Government for listening to bereaved families and surviving victims. It is only right that the inquiry is statutory to ensure that it has the power to compel witnesses and hold those responsible for failings to account. What assurances can she give that the inquiry will be conducted in a timely manner and that the lessons it uncovers will be implemented swiftly to help ensure that similar attacks do not take place?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments, for her support and for assiduously representing the needs of her constituents. As I said, the inquiry will be chaired by Her Honour Deborah Taylor, who is an experienced, senior retired judge. I have every confidence in her. She is already meeting the families of the victims and the survivors, and she has undertaken to ensure that the inquiry works at pace and makes its findings as quickly as possible.

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): May I press the Secretary of State on transcripts? When I asked recently for a transcript of a major trial, Manchester Crown court told me that the cost would be £100,000; when pressed, that went down to £9,000, but that is still way beyond the reach of most people. This is a travesty of justice. Other countries, including some American states, have free transcripts available now. When will she sort this out?

Shabana Mahmood: The right hon. Member will know that the issue at the moment is that transcripts have to be physically transcribed by hand by a human listening back to what was said and done in court. Speech-to-text transcription was piloted by the previous Government; it was not accurate enough. I am sure he

will agree that any transcripts that are ultimately published have to be accurate. That is why we are looking at AI models. We hope to be able to find a model that gives us the requisite level of accuracy and speed to be able to publish transcripts, and to do so cheaply.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): Children adopted from care or living under special guardianship are currently disproportionately at risk of entering the criminal justice system later in life if early trauma goes untreated. Given the recent changes in the adoption and special guardianship support fund, what steps is the Lord Chancellor taking alongside Cabinet colleagues to ensure the availability of more equitable access to such support?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: We know how vulnerable many children with care experiences are, and we are working closely with colleagues in the Department for Education to help reduce their risk of entering the criminal justice system. The Government are committing £50 million to the adoption and special guardianship support fund this year.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Will the Minister take a special look at the problem of rogue builders who repeatedly target our constituents—often very vulnerable people? They take thousands from them and wreck their homes, yet the only redress is said to be trading standards. Surely that amounts to fraud and there ought to be a prosecution to follow.

Alex Davies-Jones: If any crime is committed, or even alleged to have been committed, it should be reported to the police in the first instance. Victims have rights under the victims code. We have recently done a campaign to advertise the code to create awareness of it, and we will soon consult on the code so that it reaches all potential victims of crime more broadly.

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

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): I thank the Lord Chancellor for establishing the inquiry into the Nottingham attacks, but freedom of information requests by the charity Hundred Families disclosed last month that at least 392 mental health patients in England committed or were suspected of murder or manslaughter between 2018 and 2023. The victims included Susan and Jeffrey Farrance, the elderly parents of my constituent. Will the inquiry consider cases like that of the Farrances so that we can learn all lessons necessary to prevent these tragic and avoidable crimes?

Shabana Mahmood: I thank the Chair of the Justice Committee for raising an important issue for his own constituents that also has wider significance. I will publish the full terms of reference and place them in the Libraries of both Houses very soon. Regardless of whether the review goes into the specifics of every other type of case, I am sure that it will make findings on how such cases, particularly involving people with mental health conditions, are properly managed. I am sure that those findings will be of interest not just to our Department but to others, and will be implemented by the Government in due course.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): We have a case in my constituency of a young offender, well below 16, who is causing havoc—he has been arrested many times—and is not complying with a court order. The assumption is against incarceration because of his age. Will the Minister explain what work the Government are doing to crack down on prolific offending by young people well below 16 who are causing stress and fear in their local communities?

Sir Nicholas Dakin: I am very happy to answer queries about that particular issue, if the hon. Lady wishes to write to me. The Government have increased the youth offending team budget this year and continue to invest in the turnaround programme. As I said before, it has been shown that young people who are engaged in that programme have only a 5% chance of reoffending.

Birmingham: Waste Collection

3.40 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government if she will make a statement on the disruption to waste collection and the deployment of the military in Birmingham.

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): Before I start, may I recognise, on his passing, the significant contribution of Pope Francis? Also, as the Minister for Local Government in England, I wish everyone a happy St George's day for tomorrow.

Members across the House will be aware of the continuing disruption caused by industrial action in Birmingham. The Government have repeatedly called for Unite to call off the strikes and accept the fair deal that is on the table. The commissioners and the council are undertaking the necessary reforms in the context of a challenging financial situation, with the legacy of equal pay, when women workers were systematically paid less than their male counterparts in similar roles. Though the council must chart that course itself, our actions speak to our determination to ensure the welfare of the citizens of Birmingham.

We have been providing intensive support to the council in its efforts to address the backlog of waste that has been building up on the city's streets, and significant progress has been made in the last fortnight through a concerted effort and with the assistance of other councils, private operators and the endeavour of many hundreds of determined workers, who have worked extremely long hours. The result is that 26,000 tonnes of excess waste have been removed and levels are now approaching normal. More than 100 bin trucks are out every day and regular bin collections have resumed. The council continues to monitor the situation closely to ensure that waste does not build up again.

This is a Government who stand up for working people. The industrial action is in no one's interest because the deal on the table is a good deal. The council has worked hard to offer routes to maintain pay through transferring workers to comparable roles and, in some cases, to upskill those workers in scope. There may of course be details to iron out, but that is why talks are so important. As we have repeatedly made clear, Unite should suspend the strike, accept the deal and bring the dispute to an end. The Government will continue to be on the side of the people of Birmingham and to support the council in creating the sustainable, fair and reliable waste service that its residents deserve.

Kevin Hollinrake: It is astounding that the Secretary of State, having had to resort to calling in the Army to cover her blushes for her failure to resolve the situation, was not intending to make an oral statement to the House and had to be dragged before it by means of this urgent question. She is failing—failing to stand up to the unions, failing to protect the residents of the UK's second city and failing to protect the reputation of our nation—and now resorting to being bailed out by our brave armed forces, which I note the Minister did not even mention. It is a national embarrassment.

I realise that the Minister and the Secretary of State were not born until 1980, but many in this House and in the wider country remember very well the 1970s and the winter of discontent. It is clear that with this Government we risk going back to those days. To prevent that from happening, I offer the Minister and the Secretary of State our support, if the Minister will clarify and confirm the following. What is the projected cost to the taxpayer of the military's involvement? Will he rule out the humiliation of service personnel ever having to collect refuse? Will he commit to using provisions in the Strikes (Minimum Service Levels) Act 2023 to ensure that residents receive a basic level of service, and to reinstate legislation that would allow the council to commission agency workers to clean up the city until the strike is resolved?

Finally, will he abandon provisions in the Employment Rights Bill that give unions access to every single workplace in this country, that lower the threshold for union recognition, and that make it much easier for unions to call strikes? Do that now, and the Minister will have our support. However, if he and the Secretary of State duck the tough decisions to please her union paymasters, the tail may once again wag the dog in this country, which could take it back to the 1970s.

Jim McMahon: If that is a dog, it is more like a Bichon Frisé attack on the Government I'm afraid—it really did not land. What do people in Birmingham want? In the context of an unacceptable situation, where rubbish is accumulating, the people of Birmingham want it to be resolved. What they have in this Government is a Government who do not pray in aid party politics or councils' rows in the way the previous Government did. What we do is work together in partnership for the end that is important—[*Interruption.*] Conservative Members have been carping from the sidelines—they have been doing this for weeks now—and they have offered every criticism but not a single solution. We would be forgiven for believing that they had not been in power for 14 years, when Birmingham was sent to the wall. We are, of course, appreciative of our colleagues in the MOD for the support that they have offered, and the three logistics advisers have made a difference. However, as they themselves have said, Birmingham is more than capable of making sure that the rounds are collected, and the trucks are on the road as of this week. That mutual support is important.

I need to pull up the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) on a comment that he made earlier. He spoke about the “humiliation” of collecting waste from the streets, and the “humiliation” of decent working-class people going out to provide a public service to millions of people across England. It is not a humiliation; it is a public service, and one that is critical to our nation's interests. To say that the job is a humiliation—I would say that working-class people, the bin collectors across this country, take pride in their work, and they deserve more respect from the bloody Opposition.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I associate myself with the Minister's remarks on the passing of Pope Francis. May his soul rest in perfect peace.

[*Florence Eshalomi*]

It is important for us to remember the innocent residents who are caught up in this dispute, and the fact that they have been suffering for many weeks without that refuse being collected. I think about the many families who had to celebrate Eid while seeing all that rubbish continue to pile up. In just over four weeks there will be another half term, and again many families will be at home. It is important that the Government continue to work closely with Birmingham and all parties to make sure that this is resolved.

The Minister outlined some of the concerns around the funding pressures that councils of all political parties have faced over the past few years. He will know that he and the Government have handed out exceptional financial support for a number of councils, and a number of councils continue to face challenges with their finances. Can he assure the House that in discussions with Birmingham council and others, we will continue to support hard-working local government officers, ensuring that their finances are again fit and proper, so that we do not face situations such as the one we see in Birmingham?

Jim McMahon: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for that question, which in a way goes to the heart of the fragile situation that we inherited as a Government. After 14 years, Birmingham, and in fact many councils of all political stripes, had been sent to the wall by the previous Government. The number of bankruptcy notices that were issued is testament to that. We have been able to stabilise the sector through the recovery grant—the first time ever that that grant was issued, and Birmingham was the largest beneficiary. We have given that city the support it needs, but we want to ensure that the progress we have seen over the past couple of weeks is maintained. I completely appreciate that there were unacceptable scenes where waste has built up on people's streets. That is not okay in normal times, and it is certainly not okay in half term, when children are playing in their local parks and on their streets. That is why we moved quickly to ensure that that waste was removed. The fact that 26,000 tonnes has been removed shows the dedication of those frontline workers.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

It is unacceptable that this dispute has dragged on into a ninth week. Even more disgraceful, the people of Birmingham are now forced to clean up their own streets. I thank those who gave up their Easter holidays to pick up rubbish for their neighbours but, let us be honest, they should never have had to do it.

This goes way beyond Birmingham. It started with an equal pay claim that bankrupted the council, and with widespread local government reorganisation ahead of us all, what will stop it from happening again? As councils merge, staff will sit side by side doing the same jobs but on completely different pay from each other. That is unjust, unsustainable and a ticking timebomb. Six years after the reorganisation of Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole council, which I led, pay harmonisation is still going on. We could not afford to

meet everyone's expectations, and neither can most councils, which teeter on the edge. What is the Minister doing to stop this from spiralling elsewhere and to protect residents from eye-watering tax hikes or devastating service cuts?

Jim McMahon: I want to be careful not to stray too far from Birmingham, which is not affected by local government reorganisation. However, it is completely usual, when looking at the transfer of the workforce, for negotiations to take place with workers and trade unions to harmonise terms and conditions and pay. That will take place in the usual way. We need to be careful not to set hares running unnecessarily.

The issue in Birmingham—the foundational issue, in a way—is equal pay. For far too long, women workers were paid far less than their male counterparts for comparable roles—that went on for decades. The council has to resolve that, as other councils did many years earlier. Women cannot continue to be paid less than their male counterparts. In the end, this is about harmonisation done in the right way.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister for their support in addressing the public health concerns in Birmingham. As the Minister says, 26,000 tonnes of waste has now been cleared, and weekly collections will resume. I put on record my thanks to everyone involved in the clean-up, including many volunteers—they are the best of Birmingham. Does the Minister agree that it is right that the council resolves equal pay issues, with over 7,000 women now due compensation? That is precisely what the deal on offer does, while ensuring that no worker has to lose pay.

Jim McMahon: That is precisely the issue with the WRCO—waste recycling and collection officer—role that started the strike action to begin with. An enhanced payment was made for that role that did not stand, when it went through job evaluation, compared with women who were doing similar roles elsewhere in the council. That cannot stand. There must be a red line whereby no agreement can be reached if it compromises the council position on equal pay and builds up liability for the future. I absolutely pay tribute to the community groups and frontline workers who have made sure that the response to the clean-up has been one of co-operation.

Sir Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Will the Minister make a point of thanking the well-run and cost-effective Conservative councils that have either helped or offered to help clear up this terrible mess? Will he bear in mind that it is not just the bin strike that my poor, long-suffering constituents in the royal town of Sutton Coldfield have had to endure, but the pending closure of our libraries and the massive hike in council tax? Does he understand why so many of us want to see a proper judge-led inquiry into how bankrupt Birmingham city council has got Britain's second city into this mess? Will he also bear in mind that this is a dispute between two wings of the Labour party? Whatever I may think of the council that he leads, it is quite wrong that my constituent, the leader of the council, should have had a photograph of his house put on social media by Unite. Will the Minister condemn that action by Unite?

Jim McMahon: Let me be clear: over the past few weeks, photographs have been taken of the houses of union officials, and the same trade union has used photographs of the homes of the council leader and cabinet members. Neither of those things is okay. This is already a fraught dispute. It requires the good faith of all parties, and negotiation through being in the same room and talking through the issues in the interests of the workers and the people of the city of Birmingham. Our hope, and our expectation, is that, although what has happened has happened, a line is drawn and we can move forward in good faith.

Tahir Ali (Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley) (Lab): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. The crisis over bin collections in Birmingham has dragged on for far too long, and my constituents have suffered significantly as a result. While I understand the financial pressures on the council, clearly it is unreasonable to expect any worker to accept a pay cut. Will the Minister commit to taking all steps possible to encourage good faith negotiations between both parties, so that a fair deal can be reached and this vital service can be restored without any further disruption?

Jim McMahon: I do not think there is a single example—although I am prepared to be corrected—where equal pay has not had winners and losers on the edges. That is an element of equal pay that we have to accept. The envelope is not limited, so the books have to balance.

On the issue of how the WRCO role is being changed and whether workers need to lose pay, the council is offering a sideways move in the street scene division on the same grade 3, which will mean no loss of income. It is offering workers a move to an equivalent grade 3 role even if training is required, and it will provide that training. It is also offering LGV driver training, so that loaders can upgrade to being a driver, which carries a higher payment than their current role.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): I recall asking the Minister on a previous occasion about getting support from military personnel, and he said that I had gone “from zero to 100” very quickly. The difficulty with this Government is that they have been very slow to react. I was out last Thursday picking up bin bags with youth workers from a local organisation who had worked 12-hour shifts and were then spending their evenings cleaning up the streets. The Minister has failed to raise the fact that thousands of tonnes of recyclable waste have not been collected, encouraging further fly-tipping. When will this Government intervene and resolve the issue? Bin workers work hard. Up to 200 of them will lose up to £8,000, and that needs to be resolved.

Jim McMahon: I share the hon. Member's appreciation of community volunteers who are cleaning up the streets, just as I welcome the hard work of hundreds of frontline council workers who have stepped in. Their efforts have meant that 26,000 tonnes of accumulated waste has now been cleared. We can agree on that, at least.

On the question of when it is appropriate for the Government to offer support, it is when a major incident is declared. As the hon. Member will know, I have been in Birmingham every week since then. There have

been daily update calls with the council, and we have been providing essential support to the council to clear up the city.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his efforts to keep Birmingham MPs informed on a cross-party basis during this dispute. I would also like to associate myself with the condemnation of the publication of photographs of the houses of some of the parties to the dispute. My residents in Birmingham Northfield want to see a service that is not the same as before the strike; it must be better, and I know the Minister shares that ambition.

We have heard today about the 1970s. It is not so long ago that a Conservative Secretary of State stood at the Dispatch Box and said that he was delighted to announce 12% cuts to Birmingham's budget—the sharpest of any unitary authority. Does the Minister agree that the one word missing from the shadow Secretary of State's question was “sorry”?

Jim McMahon: We have been here repeatedly for questions, statements and even urgent questions in the House, and on not a single occasion has the shadow Secretary of State or shadow Ministers accepted their role, after 14 years of government, in driving councils of all colours to the wall. We need to bear in mind that commissioners were brought in under the previous Government, and Birmingham had to declare bankruptcy under the previous Government. The only difference now is that it has a Government on side willing to meet it financially—that is why the recovery grant was so important—but also in spirit and through our actions, which is why we are working in partnership to clean up the streets and get Birmingham clean.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): Which legacy is the Minister most proud of: rubbish and rats in Birmingham, or Labour's breach of its promise to the electorate to freeze council tax?

Jim McMahon: I am sure that sounded a better question when it was being drafted this morning. I do not think anyone takes pride in the strike action and the waste that accumulated on the streets. This is a very serious issue. It is unacceptable that a major incident had to be declared and that public health concerns were so prevalent. That is why we took quick action. It is why the streets have been cleaned to the tune of 26,000 tonnes, and it is why there are more daily collections taking place now in terms of tonnage than there were in routine times—to make sure they catch up and do not slip back—but we recognise that, in the end, the only solution is to deal with the underlying strike action that is causing the disruption.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am a member of Unite, and I am very proud of that; I think four generations of my family have been members. Not to rise to the provocations of Conservative Members, but there is a difference between having three military advisers and having troops on the streets. The latter would be seen as an act of provocation and a worsening of the situation. May I suggest that the Minister or the Secretary of State convenes the meetings between the council and the union to secure progress in the negotiations?

Jim McMahon: There has been almost daily communication with the council, and the trade unions have made representations, too, but we need to be clear about appropriate roles and responsibilities, and about the lines of accountability. The council, not the Government, is the employer of the workforce in Birmingham, and it is for the employer and the employees to reach an agreement that both can accept. We urge both parties to negotiate in good faith. We believe that the deal on the table is a good deal. The right hon. Gentleman is correct to say that workers have the right to make their representations, but the council has to take into account all its workforce, including over 7,000 women, who historically were paid far less than their male counterparts for equivalent roles. That is the foundational issue at the heart of the dispute.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Despite assurances from the Dispatch Box before the Easter recess, we continue to see piles of rubbish on the streets in Birmingham. The costs are mounting, and the rats—the squeaky blinders—continue to roam the streets of Britain's second city freely, so I ask the Minister again: what are his Government and Labour-run Birmingham city council doing to bring an end to the strike? Enough is enough—residents want an end to the situation.

Jim McMahon: Work is still taking place. I should address the question about rodents, because that is a serious issue. Nobody wants to see rats in the streets, particularly around the accumulated waste. We welcome the council's decision to suspend the charge for calling out pest control, so that households that report rodents are not financially disadvantaged. On the Government's response to the situation, from day one we said that the accumulated waste was unacceptable and a public health hazard. The Government stepped in to support the council, to ensure that we could get more trucks out of the depot, increase the amount of waste collected and regularise the number of routine collections. I am pleased that progress has been made, but what will ultimately resolve the dispute is the trade unions and the council reaching an agreement that brings the strike action to an end.

Mr Speaker: On the promotion of Leeds United, I call Richard Burgon.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I take that as congratulations from the Speaker of the House of Commons on the promotion of Leeds United, so thank you very much, Mr Speaker. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] That seems to be the most popular thing I have said in the House for some time.

I am proud to be a Unite member and a trade union member. I remember the 2009 Leeds bin strike, when the Conservative and Lib Dem-run council tried to cut the bin workers' pay by up to £6,000. A three-month strike followed that was ultimately successful. Having listened to the points made by Members from across the Chamber, I would say that it is always wrong to castigate trade unions as being the enemy within. They are an important part of our civil democracy. It is not union officials who called this strike—or any strike—but trade union members, so here Unite the Union means the bin workers. It is really important that we do not allow trade unions and trade unionism to be demonised in this dispute, or any other.

Jim McMahon: We can certainly agree that people have the right to strike, but people also have the right to go to work. We saw a restriction of the number of bin trucks that could leave the depot, which had a significant impact on the amount of waste that could be collected. The direct result was the accumulation of tens of thousands of tonnes of waste on the streets. In the end, we really want Unite, as the negotiating body for the workforce it represents, and Birmingham city council, as the employer, to get around the table on the deal that has been tabled, to iron out the differences, if there are any, and to reach an agreement. If that will take longer, we strongly encourage Unite to suspend strike action during the negotiations.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): Birmingham city council is the largest local authority in the UK by population. Sadly, for many years it has struggled with severe problems that impact its residents. The Government have engaged in local government reorganisation across much of the country. Large parts of the area covered by Birmingham city council may be better administered by bodies elsewhere, outside the boundaries of the city. Will the Minister look at whether it is time to review the boundaries of Birmingham city council? The council is so large that it cannot function properly for its residents.

Jim McMahon: I do not think that anyone could criticise my work ethic, but reorganising a third of England and the 20 million residents affected would be quite a reorganisation to deliver. As things stand, there is no intention of reorganising Birmingham, but there is absolutely an intention of resolving the underlying trade union dispute, getting people back to work, and reaching an agreement that is acceptable.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I point out that the strike started under this Labour Government, and under a Labour council—and despite all the Minister's hand-wringing and anguish, the strike continues under a Labour Government, and under a Labour council? It is futile for the Government to pretend it is all somebody else's fault, least of all the fault of the previous Government. Will the Minister avoid misrepresenting what my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) said? He made the perfectly reasonable suggestion that the Minister should reinstate the legislation that would allow agency workers to be brought in to pick up rubbish off the streets of Birmingham. Why will the Minister not do that? Because he is pussyfooting around and kowtowing to his Labour paymasters, the trade unions.

Jim McMahon: That certainly gets the award for the silliest question yet. There is no kowtowing or bowing. We played this with an absolutely straight bat in the interests of the people of Birmingham, as they would expect. On agency workers, our judgment is that they are not required, because the mutual aid from neighbouring councils and housing associations, and the redeployment of frontline staff from elsewhere in the council, has dealt with the waste that accumulated. We have seen 26,000 tonnes of waste cleared. As I said, now that trucks are leaving the depot as usual in most cases, more tonnes per day are being collected than during regular times, so the council is on top of this. There is no need to bring in additional agency staff in the way that the hon. Gentleman says.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Given that the Minister no doubt sincerely believes that the offer on the table is a good one, why does he think the unions are not accepting it?

Jim McMahon: It is clear from the negotiations that there are a number of moving parts. I should declare that we are not replicating those negotiations in this Chamber; they should be between the employer, the employees and the trade unions, and we should not try to circumvent that here. Our belief is that the agreement strikes the right balance between giving support to the workers affected—those in the WRCO roles—and not undermining the equal pay work that has been done. For far too long, we have seen women being underpaid for the work that they do.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Minister failed to answer the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) on whether troops should be used to clear up the mess. Will he do so now? The Defence Secretary, who is sitting next to the Minister, will know very well that a trained soldier's pay starts at around £25,000. If troops are used, will they receive arduous duty payments under the arrangements for military aid to civil authorities?

Jim McMahon: I think I have covered this at least a couple of times. As I said, we are grateful to our colleagues in the Ministry of Defence for the logistical support they have provided. We had three members of staff on logistical planning; they have had a significant impact, and we and the council are grateful for that. There is no requirement for troops to be deployed on the streets to collect waste, because the council is getting on top of it. We do not take that for granted, and we do not want any disruption to that, but to be clear, the military are not needed on the streets of Birmingham. The council have the situation in hand, and workers are doing that work today.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I have a genuine question for the Minister. I am a little bit confused about what these three supermen and women from the MOD or the military have done. One of the principles of mutual aid and military aid to a civil authority is that the people being helped must not have the capacity themselves, and it must be unreasonable to expect them to grow that capacity in a timely manner. What have those people done that Birmingham city council could not do itself?

Jim McMahon: I am usually a bit suspicious when somebody starts their question with "This is a genuine question", but that was actually a proper question. Members could learn from it. *[Interruption.]* Calm down. On the added value that the MOD was able to provide, every council has rotas for getting bins collected from a given place. Birmingham had mutual aid offers from other councils, and it had to work out how best to use quite different offers of support—how to deploy trucks and available workers across the city, working in a different way. The logistical workers from the MOD supported the creation of new collection rounds to clear the accumulated waste.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): Could the Minister—or the Pied Piper, as he is quickly becoming known—clear up the record, please? In his opening

statement, he said that the military offered its support to clear up this mess. Did it offer, or was it ordered by his Department to provide support, because his Government cannot stand up to the unions?

Jim McMahon: I have already covered the value that the MOD has provided, and of course, we work in partnership. The offer of support was made to the council, which received that offer gratefully. However, the MOD, whose logistical planners have been on the ground in Birmingham, has been clear that the council is at a point at which it does not need its support, because it has the collection rounds in place. I hope the hon. Gentleman welcomes that.

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Just eight weeks ago, during a Select Committee evidence session, the Minister told me that "there is a lot of good work taking place in Birmingham".

The Government want to create super-councils, covering half a million people and reaching over vast areas to manage bin collections and other vital services, against the wishes of my constituents. We have seen the result in Birmingham. Does the Minister believe that tons of rubbish on the streets is the model that the rest of the country should follow?

Jim McMahon: In a way, that question shows a misunderstanding of why Birmingham is in the situation it is in. It makes no more sense to say that Birmingham's problems are because of its size and scale than it would to say, "Look at the debt liabilities built up by some of the smallest councils in the country, which have borrowed many hundreds or thousands of times their revenue." In a way, these problems are down to long-term issues. Some of this situation is due to the foundational funding that Birmingham city council has been given, but Birmingham is getting its house in order. It is not an easy process, and that council would say itself that it has a way to go. When it comes to resolving historical equal pay liabilities, and issues with the Oracle IT system, the council faces a significant financial liability. It is making progress on modernising its workforce and on the future operating model, but it has some way to go.

Mr Speaker: That allows us to come to Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers to some very difficult questions. He will understand, of course, the absolute necessity of military intervention in civil life in Northern Ireland over a great many years. While it is never an easy option, does the Minister agree that if it is the only option to ensure that disease does not spread through the city—if a pay deal cannot be reached—action has to be taken, before the ill and the vulnerable pay the price of this stand-off?

Jim McMahon: As things stand, a normal service has returned to most streets at most times. The accumulated waste that was building up—which was not acceptable at all—has been removed. Some 26,000 tonnes has been removed; in most places at most times, the collection of bins is taking place as normal, and over 100 trucks a day are leaving the depots as usual. We hope that we do

[Jim McMahon]

not return to the scenes that the hon. Gentleman has described, for the reasons that he expressed. That is not acceptable from a public health point of view, and has consequences.

Ukraine Update

4.14 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey): Today, HMS Prince of Wales set sail from Portsmouth. I trust that the whole House will join me in wishing the entire carrier strike group a safe and successful global deployment. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

Mr Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the ongoing war in Ukraine. Today, Parliament returns from our Easter break, and during the past two weeks Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine has continued, with drone strikes, missile attacks and fierce fighting on the frontline. On Palm Sunday, men, women and children in Sumy on their way to church were hit by Putin's deadliest attack on Ukrainian civilians so far this year, killing 35 people, including young children, and injuring over 100 more. We are united in condemnation of this brutal attack and of Putin's illegal actions.

At this critical moment for Ukraine and for European security, we have stepped up the Government's efforts in support of Ukraine, and we will step up further to increase military support for the fight today and to secure peace for tomorrow. We cannot jeopardise the peace by forgetting about the war, so 10 days ago in Brussels, the UK convened and I co-chaired the 27th meeting of the Ukraine defence contact group, alongside my good friend the German Defence Minister Boris Pistorius. Some 51 nations and partners from Europe, the Indo-Pacific and South America came together at NATO headquarters with Ukrainian President Zelensky, US Defence Secretary Hegseth and NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte. We came together to step up support for Ukraine in the fight. Together we pledged a record €21 billion of military support to put Ukraine in the strongest possible position and to increase pressure on Putin to negotiate.

This year, the UK is providing £4.5 billion in military support to Ukraine—more than ever before. In Brussels, I announced that £200 million of that support will be surged to the frontline, with supplies starting to reach Ukraine's fighters within this month, including radar systems, anti-tank mines and hundreds of thousands of drones. I also announced £160 million to help repair and maintain essential battlefield vehicles and equipment. This support will strengthen Ukrainian troops in the close fight, and it will also strengthen our industrial links with Ukraine and boost UK businesses.

President Trump talks about peace through strength, and it is the commitments made through the Ukraine defence contact group that provide the strength to secure that peace. Despite President Putin's promise of a 30-hour pause in fighting, I can confirm that Defence Intelligence has found

"no indication that a ceasefire on the frontline was observed over the Easter period".

Some 10,000 missiles and drones have been fired into Ukraine this year alone, including from the Black sea. While Putin has said he declared an Easter truce, he broke it. While Putin says he wants peace, he has rejected a full ceasefire. While Putin says he wants to put an end to the fighting, he continues to play for time in the negotiations.

The Russian military continues to pressure Ukraine on a number of fronts. I can confirm that Russian military progress is slowing. Putin gained less territory

in March than he did in February, and less territory in February than he did in January. Ukrainian towns that Russia has been targeting since before Christmas have still not been captured. Ukrainian troops have still not been ejected from Russian territory in Kursk.

Whatever ground Putin is taking comes at a huge human cost. More than 940,000 Russians are likely to have been killed or injured in the war so far, including 150,000 killed or injured this year alone. Last month the average daily casualty rate on the Russian side was 1,300, almost double the rate this time last year. At home, Putin faces crippling interest rates of 21%, while inflation is running at over 10% and the Russian Government are spending nearly 40% of their entire budget on his military campaign. It is, however, likely that in the days ahead Russia will keep up attacks on the Sumy oblast to help it to reclaim nearby contested areas of Kursk.

In the central Donetsk oblast, Russia is targeting urban strongholds such as Toretsk, Povrosk and Chasiv Yar, and in Kharkiv, Russia continues to make assaults towards the rail and logistics hub of Kupiansk. We expect more ground to be taken and more Russian missiles to be fired into Ukraine, which is why we must remain united for Ukraine—across the House, across the country, and across those nations standing alongside Ukraine. We must step up support for Ukraine and pressure on Putin, to force him to recognise that now is the time for peace and that continuing the war will prove to be much worse for Russia in the long run.

We believe that peace is possible, and we must be ready for when that peace comes, so as well as providing vital military aid, the UK Government continue the push for peace. The Foreign Secretary joined ceasefire discussions with the United States, France, Germany and Ukraine in Paris last week, and in Brussels 10 days ago, along with my good friend the French Defence Minister, Sébastien Lecornu, I convened and co-chaired the first Defence Ministers' meeting of the coalition of the willing, with 30 countries coming together to build on the hard work of more than 200 military planners from Europe and beyond.

That operational planning must remain classified, but I can assure the House that the plans are real, substantial and well developed. Our reassurance force will have clear objectives for Ukraine: first, to secure safe skies; secondly, to secure safe seas; thirdly, to support peace on the land; and fourthly, to help the Ukrainian armed forces become their own strongest possible deterrent against future Russian attacks. In the days ahead this detailed planning will continue, domain by domain, and nations will continue to provide firm commitments for the coalition. Tomorrow I will meet Ukrainian Defence Minister Umerov and other allies as the Government bring together the United States, the United Kingdom, and European Ministers and national defence security advisers to discuss the next steps. That will include discussing what a ceasefire might look like, and how to secure peace in the long term.

This war was never just about the fate of one nation. It is about not allowing national borders to be redrawn by force, and about preventing aggressors across the world from being emboldened to threaten the security of all nations. That is why the defence of the UK starts in Ukraine. It is why UK leadership is playing a unique role, to put Ukraine in the strongest position on the

battlefield and in negotiations, and to prepare the building blocks for a lasting peace that will safeguard Ukraine's sovereignty and deter Putin from future aggression. I hope that the House will join me in sending a signal to President Putin, and in saying to Ukraine, "We will stand with you in the fight and we will stand with you in the peace, whenever that may come."

4.23 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): May I associate the Opposition with the Secretary of State's wishing a good and successful mission to the crew of HMS Prince of Wales as it sets sail on its latest trip?

I am grateful to the Secretary of State, both for advance sight of his statement and for the support that was provided by his Department for my recent visit to Ukraine; we provided the same support when we were in government. It was a privilege to pay tribute to the victims of this terrible war at the Wall of Memory in Kyiv, but it was also a powerful reminder of the stark contrast between the reality on the ground of continued casualties and the lies and propaganda from the Kremlin in respect of any so-called ceasefire.

It must be clear that to Putin a ceasefire is simply part of a game—one that he has no intention of pausing—and we must continue to stand with all our allies in being 100% clear about who the aggressor is in this war. Those who pay the price for Putin's game are innocent civilians, such as those killed in the terrible strike on Sumy on Palm Sunday. Is the Secretary of State able to shed any light on reports that Russian forces used a cluster munition as part of the attack on civilians, and if so, does this not illustrate the extraordinary contrast between claims of a ceasefire and the reality of the Russians' continued indiscriminate bombing? In the face of such aggression, we remain proud of the extraordinary role that the United Kingdom has played in backing Ukraine's struggle under successive Governments, and I welcome the continued support announced by the Ukraine defence contact group.

I turn to the Secretary of State's latest update on the coalition of the willing. Although we will always stand with the Government in supporting Ukraine, he knows that it would be a major shift to go from the indirect provision of munitions to boots on the ground. Therefore, as the Opposition, we are duty bound to probe what remain several unanswered but very significant practical questions that any such deployment would raise.

A month ago, on 22 March, I wrote to the Secretary of State with a series of questions on the coalition of the willing, but I have yet to receive a reply. Given the importance of those questions, I will ask them now. First, what progress has he made on securing a US military backstop? Secondly, what would be the expected rules of engagement? Thirdly, how many nations have definitively committed to sending troops? Fourthly, will he consider derogating from the European convention on human rights for any deployment, given our military's previous experience of vexatious lawsuits arising from overseas operations?

Of course, an extraordinary aspect of the coalition of the willing is that we are meant to be leading with France, while at the same time—behind our back—it is seeking to undermine our fishing rights in our sovereign waters over access to a European defence fund that will definitively include non-EU nations. When I pointed

[James Cartlidge]

that out at oral questions last month, the Secretary of State asked me to “drop” the “Brexit rhetoric”, yet over the Easter recess it was he who blasted the EU’s foreign affairs chief Kaja Kallas when she suggested that his plan for troops in Ukraine was unclear. What is clear? Almost alone, we stood by Ukraine from the very beginning of the war, helping it to avoid an early capitulation that would have been a disaster for the whole of Europe. We also offer our nuclear deterrent to European NATO 24/7—not to get better fishing rights, but to defend the freedom of European nations.

A country that does all that should not be excluded from a defence fund that will include non-EU states, and should not face punitive measures against its fishing fleet, when we are meant to be doing everything possible to strengthen European defence solidarity. The Secretary of State needs to understand that this is not about Brexit, Britain or France; it is about the security of the whole of Europe. Does he understand that, and can he confirm categorically that the Government will not offer any concessions on fishing rights in order to secure an EU defence pact?

Finally, I turn to procurement for our own armed forces. Both in Kyiv and with cross-party colleagues in Parliament this morning, I had the pleasure of meeting Ukrainian manufacturers of drones that have been highly effective on the frontline. Will the Secretary of State support such companies to partner with British companies and to set up operations in the UK, both to boost Ukraine and to give our military rapid access to proven capabilities? Given how much of this rests on the strategic defence review, will it be published this month?

John Healey: I am glad the hon. Gentleman has been to Ukraine recently, and I am glad we were able to facilitate that visit. I am proud of the number of Members of this House who are regularly going to Ukraine. It has a big impact on the Ukrainian population, who do not necessarily hear our debates in the UK. When they see British parliamentarians of all parties and you, Mr Speaker—as the Speaker of this House—in Ukraine, they know that this country stands united and stands with them.

The hon. Gentleman is completely right to contrast Putin’s claims of a ceasefire with the reality of continued brutal attacks, including on the civilian population of Ukraine. He asked about a potential negotiated peace in which we, alongside 30 other nations in the coalition of the willing, consider how best we can help secure a lasting peace, which is what President Trump has promised to deliver. He will have heard the Prime Minister say that we are fully committed to putting British troops on the ground if necessary, and we would do that because the security of the UK starts in Ukraine. He asked about the US, and both I and the Prime Minister have been clear in our discussions with the US that, post a negotiated ceasefire and peace, Ukraine will need long-term security assurances and that there is a role for the US to play in those.

On the ECHR, as the hon. Gentleman knows better than anyone, it is long-standing practice of successive Governments that UK deployments at home and abroad will always comply with international law. That is what sets us apart from nations such as Putin’s Russia. I will

not be drawn into what any of the operational deployments may look like, because the only person who benefits from that is President Putin.

The hon. Gentleman raised two other things with me. On the EU High Representative, Kaja Kallas, and the question of a European Union-UK defence agreement and access to the EU programmes that it is stepping up and putting in place, he quite rightly says that we have a part to play and a contribution to make. Kaja Kallas herself has said:

“I think the UK is a very important defence and security partner. It’s the most logical defence and security partner that we have, and it’s a beneficial relationship for both sides.”

That is why she and we are committed to negotiating a defence and security agreement.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman is right to point to the significance of drones in the current battle. It is now the fact that more casualties on both sides are caused by drones than by artillery. On the UK-Ukrainian link, we have helped manufacture, in this country and in Ukraine, and supply over 14,000 drones since the last election in July. This is central to the Ukrainian defence strategy, and it is central to the future of our own forces—

James Cartlidge: And the SDR?

John Healey: The SDR, as we have said many times, is close to completion. It is being finalised, and it will be published in the spring.

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

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Although it was saddening to hear about the continued colossal death and destruction in Ukraine, I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement. Indeed, I welcome his leadership of the Ukraine defence contact group, which by pledging a record €21 billion, has demonstrated that the 51 allies are firmly committed to helping our Ukrainian friends in their hour of need. He mentioned the many shorter ceasefires that were agreed and then broken, and the question we need to ask ourselves is: when President Putin says he wants a ceasefire, is that actually the case? However, if a much-needed ceasefire is agreed, how confident is the Secretary of State of convening and then keeping the coalition of the willing together?

John Healey: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question, and for the job he does in chairing the Defence Committee. One of the trickiest tasks in the work undertaken by our military planners is that it is not clear in what circumstances any forces may be required to be deployed, and it is not clear that the details of the negotiated peace deal we all want to see will be in place. He asked me a straight question, and when the deal is done, the peace is negotiated and the ceasefire is in place, I believe it will actually be easier, not harder, to hold together and enlarge the number of nations willing to be a part of the coalition of the willing. In the meeting I chaired at NATO headquarters 10 days ago—the first ever meeting of the Defence Ministers of the coalition of the willing—the 30 nations around the table, all participating in the detailed operational military planning that is continuing, were not just from Europe but beyond.

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

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I thank the Defence Secretary for advance sight of his statement.

The Liberal Democrats welcome the £200 million of support to the frontline in Ukraine. Over Easter, Putin proved that he had no interest in securing peace. Within hours of declaring a supposed Easter truce, Putin unleashed a fresh wave of drone and artillery attacks across many parts of the frontline. Meanwhile, President Trump has shown once again his utter indifference towards the Ukrainian people's struggle. After boasting that he would end the war within 24 hours of taking office, he now threatens to withdraw US support for mediating talks altogether. It is no wonder his efforts have failed, given his warped approach of applying pressure to Kyiv while offering the hand of friendship to the Kremlin.

We cannot rely on President Trump if we want to secure a just peace in Ukraine, one that respects Ukraine's right to self-determination and proves that aggression towards neighbours does not pay. That is why the UK needs to go further and faster, together with our partners in Europe and the Commonwealth, to support Ukraine and increase the pressure on Putin. Will the Defence Secretary update the House on what steps have been taken to seize the £25 billion-worth of frozen Russian assets across the UK and deploy them to Ukraine? Will he also update the House on whether the Government plan to expand the UK's designation of vessels that are part of Russia's shadow fleet and subject to sanctions, helping to further reduce Putin's ability to fund his war through exported oil revenues?

We welcome the Government's work to convene discussions on creating a reassurance force for Ukraine. The credibility of the UK's commitment to such a force would be significantly enhanced by reversing the staggeringly irresponsible 10,000 troop cut to our Army which the Conservatives undertook while in government. Will the Defence Secretary commit to reversing those cuts today?

John Healey: I welcome the hon. Lady's welcome for the surge in UK support to Ukrainian troops on the frontline. It is important to support them at this point in their close fight. That is what we are determined to do, as well as preparing for the longer term peace that we hope will be secured.

On the peace negotiations, I would just say to her that it is President Trump who has created this opportunity for negotiations and for peace, and it really is too soon to call failure on those negotiations. Everything about the determination of some significant US figures and the work they are doing, the discussions we will help support and play a part of in London tomorrow, demonstrates that there is a broad coalition of nations that wants to see a peace in Ukraine, wants to see Putin negotiate seriously, and is willing to take the steps to help bring that about.

On the question of the pressures on Putin, whether we can make any further use of the seized Russian state assets is something we are looking closely at. It is not just a question or a judgment for the UK. It will be much more powerful if that is done with other allies, particularly through the G7. If we make any progress on that front, that is the way we will do it.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I have just come back from Ukraine—I went with other members of the Foreign Affairs Committee—and can certainly confirm what we all know, which is that there is huge gratitude and affection for the United Kingdom in Ukraine. Whatever is happening on the western front, it is a war that affects the whole of the country. Even when we were in the capital, there were three air raids in one day.

There is a desire by Ukrainians to reciprocate and support us as best they can. By necessity, they have become experts in the use of drones and want to share with us their knowledge and skills on training and development and the production of this new weapon system. Will the Government be taking up that opportunity and working with the Ukrainians on this new weapon system?

John Healey: I thank my right hon. Friend for the job that she is doing chairing the FAC, and for her commitment to Ukraine and her recent visit. I am proud of the UK's leadership on Ukraine. I am proud of the way it was led by the previous Government, supported by us in opposition. I am proud that the official Opposition now provide the necessary support for this Government to step up still further the support we can offer.

On drones, it is not just a question, as my right hon. Friend asks, of whether we will do it. We have been doing it, and for some time. I said earlier in response to the shadow Defence Secretary, since the election in July alone, we have gifted more than 14,000 drones to Ukraine. In some cases, those are drones we have made, designed and developed here, and in some cases we have done that jointly with Ukrainian companies. Sometimes, we are ensuring that they can design, develop and manufacture for themselves in Ukraine, because that is the most effective way for Ukraine to reinforce its own armed forces and industry, and it is the quickest way of getting into the hands of frontline troops the necessary equipment and assistance to fight off Putin's invasion.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): What worries me is that President Putin has said he will not accept NATO troops on the ground. In the absence of NATO troops on the ground, could we not be back to a 1939 Sudetenland situation where the aggressor takes a slug of territory and then moves in several months later? Will the Secretary of State confirm that he is absolutely convinced—perhaps he can also convince President Trump—that in the absence of NATO troops on the ground, this is a worthless peace?

John Healey: No one is talking about NATO troops, Madam Deputy Speaker. The coalition of the willing is a coalition of nations—many but not all of which are NATO members—willing to come together to discuss the military options and plan in close liaison with NATO because there are potential implications for NATO.

President Trump is leading the negotiations. President Putin is not yet negotiating seriously, and is therefore not in a position to lay down terms like those he mentioned. Securing the ultimate objective that President Trump, President Zelensky and we all want to see—not

[John Healey]

just peace, but a lasting, durable peace—will require reassurance and security support for Ukraine while it develops the strength of its own deterrents to do that for itself in the longer term.

Derek Twigg (Widnes and Halewood) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the work he has done to secure extra funding for defence and for Ukraine. It is clear that Putin does not want peace and that all he is interested in doing is gaining Ukrainian territory. We have to send a clear message to him that neither we nor our allies are taking a step backwards. The only way we can get a just settlement for Ukraine is for Ukraine to be as militarily powerful as possible to stop the Russians taking more territory. I welcome the efforts that have been made so far and the additional funding, but, as I have said before, we will have to increase defence spending further. The 3% will not be enough by the next election.

John Healey: Although there are many experts on defence and security on both sides of this House, my hon. Friend is one of the leading voices, having followed it most closely for a great deal of time. I hear what he says, and I am pleased that he welcomes our commitment to spend 2.5% of GDP on defence by 2027—three years earlier than anyone expected—and to raise that to 3% in the next Parliament. I know he will also welcome the fact that we are putting an extra £5 billion into defence spending this year as a marker of that intent.

There was nothing in the discussions of the 51 nations and partners at the UDCG in Brussels, which I chaired with the Germans, or of the 30 nations in the coalition of the willing, which I chaired the previous day in Brussels, to suggest that the strength of the nations that stand with Ukraine is diminishing—far from it. We are stepping up and will step up further. We will stay with Ukraine for as long as it takes in the fight, and we will stay with Ukraine for as long as it takes in the peace.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement. I think the House had risen for Easter recess when President Zelensky announced that 155 Chinese troops had been deployed in support of Russian forces in Ukraine. I invite the Secretary of State to tell us how this major crossing of the Rubicon will change his Government's approach to China, and how it might inform his discussions with his American counterpart.

John Healey: In the same way that President Putin is increasingly relying both on North Korean troops to fight his battles and on Iranian missiles to hit Ukraine, what this demonstrates is his underlying weakness, not his strength. Part of the very strong message that the Chief of the Defence Staff gave when he recently visited his counterparts in China is that we see the importance of peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific as a matter not just for those nations in that region, and that the discussion on the future of Taiwan is necessarily one to be conducted by peaceful negotiation rather than by threats and conflict. There was also a very strong concern that the matter of stability, security and peace continuing in the Indo-Pacific is something of which we want China to be very well aware.

Fred Thomas (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his leadership on this topic, and not just in the UK but in Europe. My question relates to tactics. Over the weekend, I spoke on LinkedIn with a British sniper who was formerly in the Army but is now fighting for the Ukrainians on the frontline. He told me about the tactical changes that he has had to make to how he operates, but those changes are not reflected in our own sniper training in the Army, the Royal Marines and the British forces. Therefore, if we are talking about a coalition of the willing and UK troops potentially being involved in defence, when will we update the training syllabus for our own forces to reflect the tactics currently in use in Ukraine?

John Healey: My hon. Friend speaks on this from a position of great experience and authority. He points to something that hits at the heart of the strategic defence review, which is close to being finalised. Hardwired into the terms of reference in July, when the Prime Minister commissioned the review, is the fact that we need to learn the lessons from Ukraine, not in order to fight in Ukraine, but in order to recognise that the nature of warfare is changing—the shadow Defence Secretary mentioned the importance of drones—which means that the combination of forces needs to be more integrated. They need to be driven much more by technology, and that will have implications not just for equipment, but for training. I know that my hon. Friend will look forward to the publication of the SDR and that he will be on the case, including for the Defence Committee, to ensure that it is fully implemented. I welcome his contribution to those debates.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Coupled with the decision of the leader of the free world to describe Ukraine as the aggressor in this war is the news today that America may be considering no longer supplying the Supreme Allied Commander Europe to NATO. Is the Defence Secretary looking forward as much as the rest of us are to hearing what President Trump has to say, if he comes to this Parliament in September, about how it is that the system that kept the peace in Europe for 50 years after the second world war is no longer applicable for the future?

John Healey: The right hon. Gentleman and I will both look forward to the President's visit to this country when it is staged. I know that he is so experienced in this area, but I caution him against chasing these most recent comments, or regarding them as somehow profound. I would say that the US, led by President Trump—and this has been reinforced by Defence Secretary Hegseth—has rightly challenged Europe to step up on defence spending, on European security and on Ukraine.

Sir Julian Lewis *indicated assent.*

John Healey: The right hon. Gentleman is nodding his head. But Europe and other nations stepping up does not mean that the US is stepping away. When our Prime Minister was in the White House with President Trump, they had—in public and on camera—a detailed discussion about NATO, in which President Trump reaffirmed his total commitment to article 5 of the NATO treaty.

Lillian Jones (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): I thank the Defence Secretary for his statement. It is clear that Russia's aggression undermines our security right here at home in the UK. Does he agree that the outcome of this war matters deeply to every one of our constituents across the country?

John Healey: In the high politics of international peace negotiations, and in the brutal drama and killing of the battlefield, it is often easy to overlook the fact that our ability as a Government, and our ability as a nation, to offer Ukraine such support depends on the will of support of the British people. My hon. Friend is right that this battle for the future of Ukraine and the huge courage that Ukrainian men and women—military and civilian alike—are showing in resisting Putin's invasion matters to us in the UK. It matters not just because the defence of the UK and Europe starts in Ukraine; it also matters to the British people who opened their homes to refugee Ukrainians over three years ago when Putin invaded. It matters to people in this country because they recognise that the Ukrainians are fighting for what we also hold dear: the right to elect their own Government and to determine their own future as a country, and to do that without the menace of a big power and a dictator like Putin over their shoulder.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): The Defence Secretary has acknowledged MPs from across the House who have visited Ukraine. I wanted to briefly share my experience. When I visited a Ukrainian hospital, I met a man who was suffering from a chemical weapons attack, and doctors were struggling to treat him because they did not know what chemical weapons had been used. Can the Secretary of State please confirm what monitoring the MOD does of chemical weapons and other war crimes in Ukraine, and how is the UK raising that with international partners?

John Healey: We would abhor any use of chemical weapons. I am not aware of those reports, but I will check them out and write to the hon. Gentleman. He rightly points to the very sharpest end of this Ukrainian fight, which is those injured servicemen and women in Ukrainian hospitals. I am pleased to say that, from almost the first month, the UK Government were putting in place UK military medical support for the Ukrainian system. We stepped that up recently, three months ago, when I announced an increase in support and funding for it. It is an important part of the contribution we can make to keeping Ukraine in this fight.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I very much welcome the comments from my right hon. Friend about the need to spend more of our defence funds on buying weapons made in this country. It is a really helpful comment. The other day I was at BAE Systems, which is building a new factory in my constituency to produce artillery weapons, some of which I hope will go to Ukraine. Can my right hon. Friend commit that we will supply those weapons to Ukraine while-ever Ukraine wants them, and we will treat with a degree of scepticism and complete contempt the comments by Putin, trying to manufacture some sort of fake peace to suit his own ends?

John Healey: My hon. Friend mentions a company in his constituency. I do not know whether he is also referring to Sheffield Forgemasters in his constituency, which is a proud industrial firm in Sheffield, in south Yorkshire, that will be making British steel to supply to a new Rheinmetall artillery barrel factory. It is a new investment in this country, directly as a result of the Trinity House agreement struck in October between the UK and Germany, and it will create 400 jobs in Britain. It will mean that we are able to produce gun barrels in this country for the first time in over 10 years. It is a good example of investment, just like the £1.6 billion that I announced a couple of months ago for new short-range air defence missiles for Ukraine. We will see over 5,000 of those produced in Northern Ireland, creating an extra 200 jobs in Thales in Belfast. It is a good example of where we can support Ukraine, strengthen our own national security and boost economic growth at the same time.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): "Reassurance force" sounds like a euphemism for escalation that would expose our boys and girls to very significant risk, yet on 3 March the Prime Minister said to me, from the Dispatch Box, that we would not be deploying troops to Ukraine without a US backstop and without a US security guarantee. He was right, wasn't he?

John Healey: I have already said this afternoon that the Prime Minister has made it clear to President Trump, as I have done to Secretary Hegseth in the US, that we support absolutely their bid to secure a negotiated peace and we expect there to be a role for the US in helping to secure that peace for the long term. What we are leading alongside the French is a determined effort—a coalition of the willing—that demonstrates that European nations like us and the French, with the capability to lead such a deployment, are willing to step up and do more. But, as I have said, Europe and nations like the UK stepping up does not necessarily mean the US stepping away.

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): The strength of unity these past few weeks in the Ukraine defence contact group and the coalition of the willing has sent an important signal at a critical time for Ukraine. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is critical that we and allies express our unwavering support for Ukraine's right to exist, its freedom and its national sovereignty?

John Healey: I do indeed. I wonder whether my hon. Friend might help me with some of my speechwriting, as he put it succinctly and much more sharply than I have done this afternoon. This is what is at stake as the Ukrainians fight for their future, fight for their country and fight for their freedom. It is down to us to provide them with the support that they need both in the fight and in the efforts to negotiate a longer-term peace.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. There is much in it by way of a helpful update, but the key element of it for all of us should be on the final page, where he says that we must not allow

"borders to be redrawn by force".

That enjoys unanimous support.

[*Dave Doogan*]

I have a question on the £4.5 billion. How much of that is rolled over from previous commitments, and will the Secretary of State update the House on how much of it is consumed in this financial year? How much of it is in cash support and how much of it is in matériel?

When it comes to potential air policing in Ukraine, that will be on top of air policing in the south Atlantic, quick reaction alert from Coningsby and Lossiemouth, and air policing in the Baltic and the eastern Mediterranean. Would it not be unconscionable to try to do that without a substantial new order of Tranche 4 Typhoons?

John Healey: The hon. Member asks about the £4.5 billion. That is the scale of military support to Ukraine this year. It is more than this country has committed at any time before. That is a combination of £3 billion this year, plus £1.5 billion from the proceeds of the seized assets that we are also deploying. We are doing this according to a joint plan that we have developed with Ukraine for 2025 so that we look to supply what it needs most.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary was quite right to say that the announcement by President Putin of a pause in fighting over the Easter weekend was a false promise. We have seen many false promises from Putin, and his aggression against not just Ukraine but the whole of Europe is really concerning. While we were on recess, he had to scramble RAF Typhoons to the Baltic to intercept an Ilyushin Il-20M spy aircraft. What more will he do to protect NATO air and maritime space from the aggression of Putin and Russia?

John Healey: The simple answer is that we will do whatever is required as a UK contribution to the NATO alliance. I am proud of the leading role that the UK plays in NATO. I am also proud of the fact that NATO now is bigger, stronger and, with 32 nations, a better deterrent force than it was when Putin first launched his full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. That demonstrates how Putin's strategic aims in launching the invasion have come unstuck and so far he has failed to secure any of them. As my hon. Friend has said, Putin says he wants peace and an end to the fighting; now is the time, for the first time, for him to demonstrate that, to match his words with his actions and to negotiate seriously for that long-term, lasting peace.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): May I thank the Secretary of State for taking the first opportunity to make this important statement? I congratulate him on his work with the coalition of the willing. It will be important in that—building on the comments of the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartledge)—to understand the terms of engagement if that is to happen and peace is to be secured. We cannot permit woolly thinking, because that could allow another situation like Srebrenica to happen again. Will the Secretary of State assure me that he is working hard, that what any terms of engagement would be is on the agenda, and that people are crystal clear about what those terms could be to secure peace?

John Healey: I can, indeed. The right hon. Gentleman is exactly right: the potential terms of engagement are an important part of any planning, as are the terms of any peace process and settlement. That will set the framework for the potential role of any reassurance force. I can say to him and to the House that at the appropriate point, this House will have a full opportunity to discuss and debate those matters.

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the commitment of the Government—both past and present—to Ukraine. Just like this House, citizens in Norwich stand with the people of Ukraine. As the Secretary of State knows, £2.5 billion was promised for Ukraine after the sale of Chelsea football club by Roman Abramovich. As far as I understand it, that money remains frozen in a UK bank account. Will the Secretary of State update us on any progress in unlocking that fund, which is much needed for the people of Ukraine?

John Healey: If my hon. Friend will permit me, I will double-check with my colleagues in the Department that leads on that and write to her with the latest position on the Abramovich billions.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Secretary of State always speaks softly but firmly; we thank him for that. He represents the views of the people. The news that Russia is seeking peace talks is certainly heartening, but how will the Secretary of State ensure that Russia understands that it is not, and never will be, peace at any price? The allies will continue to support Ukraine until a sustainable peace is achieved and will not force Ukraine to accept a deal that does not honour the sacrifice—of life, grief, the loss of education and hope of a future—that so many Ukrainians have made over so many years.

John Healey: If I may say so, that was a very moving contribution. Part of the power of this place is not just Ministers and Government accounting to Parliament, but Parliament finding its voice in exactly the way that the hon. Gentleman said. He asks about my message to Putin. His own message and the message from this House this afternoon are strong and clear.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I recently led a roundtable of large defence manufacturers at BAE Systems' base in Christchurch. They had one clear message, which is that they want to support Ukraine. Bournemouth stands too with Ukraine. I therefore particularly welcome the Prime Minister's commitment, announced today, of UK contracts worth £30 million for drones to support Ukraine. Will the Defence Secretary say how the UK will boost jobs and growth with defence spending to support Ukraine? Will he particularly say how Dorset defence manufacturers might be able to benefit too?

John Healey: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the message of support to Ukrainians from his constituents and businesses in Dorset. He is in a part of the country where some of the most innovative and creative companies in the defence and security fields are located. I am glad to hear of the company that has recently got the £30 million contract.

My hon. Friend might like to look at some of the detail of the Chancellor's spring statement. Part of the confirmation that she and I made then was that, from this point, 10% of the defence budget will be allocated to developing, purchasing and supplying novel technologies for our own forces that the manufacturers that he cites from his constituency are involved in producing.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What planning is taking place among the allies to make up for the 40% of armaments that have hitherto been supplied by the United States to Ukraine, should it become necessary to do so?

John Healey: That was exactly the focus of the Ukraine defence contact group, and the purpose of pulling those 51 nations and partners together 10 days ago and securing the confirmation of a record €21 billion in extra military aid for Ukraine during the course of this year. That was supported by the US, with the presence of Defence Secretary Hegseth, who welcomed what he saw quite clearly as confirmation that European nations and others are stepping up to meet the challenge that he and President Trump have issued to us, quite rightly, and stepping up to meet the challenge that requires us to do more to keep Ukraine in the fight and strong for a potential peace that we all hope will be negotiated.

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. Keeping ourselves, Europe and Ukraine safe means that we have to produce more fighting forces than Putin can, but traditionally this country has focused on producing exquisite and expensive platforms. Clearly that trade-off is changing, and we are seeing \$1,000 drones in Ukraine destroying \$9 million tanks. The production trade-off between expendable and exquisite platforms has to change across our allies and ourselves. Producing those drones takes months; it will take years even to upgrade our own Challenger tanks. Will the Secretary of State set out how that changing trade-off in production will be implemented and introduced in the strategic defence review and the defence industrial strategy to keep ourselves, Europe and Ukraine safe?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is spot on, and he provides the answer to his own question about how that necessary understanding from what we have seen in Ukraine, and in other conflict zones in the middle east recently, must involve a combination of the more traditional, sophisticated defence platforms that we have tended to procure, with much more rapidly updated, updatable and upgradable new technologies such as drones. That will be set out in the strategic defence review and captured in the defence industrial strategy, but I hope my hon. Friend will see the announcement that I referred to in the spring statement of a determination to earmark 10% of defence equipment spend from this year on for novel technologies such as the ones he cites.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I very much welcome the robust tone of the Secretary of State's statement and his responses, but I am sure that deep inside he also regrets the fact that they are not reflected by many in the US Administration. Although across the House I am sure that we all appreciate the diplomatic challenges of dealing

with President Trump and his Administration, it would be reassuring if the Secretary of State could confirm that at some level it has been conveyed that it is deeply unhelpful, and indeed disconcerting to the Ukrainian diaspora in this country, that President Trump does parrot Kremlin lines.

John Healey: President Trump has created this opportunity. He has created this opportunity of a ceasefire, which the Ukrainians, as a party of peace in this process, have declared they are ready to accept. He has created the opportunity for a negotiated lasting peace. Our job is to reinforce his efforts in doing so. We are doing just that. We are supporting the Ukrainians in those negotiations, and we are supporting the US and contributing to those negotiations where we can. The next stage of that will be in London tomorrow.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Our Prime Minister has convened the largest, strongest group of countries yet behind a just and lasting peace in Ukraine. Does the Defence Secretary agree that the UK has a unique leadership role in securing peace, and that this extends beyond the provision of military assets to galvanising all our allies on upholding shared values, helping our friends to stand up to bullies, believing in sovereignty and protecting the rules-based system? In the widest sense, the long-term defence of the UK is happening in Ukraine.

John Healey: I agree. The UK does indeed have a unique leadership role, as my hon. Friend says, alongside the French in the coalition of the willing. In my discussions and involvement with military planners, Defence Ministers and others on this matter, I have been struck by how other nations recognise the unique role and responsibility of the UK and the French—they welcome it. In each case, every nation has a contribution to make, and that is what we are trying to marshal through the military planning detail and the reinforcement of the coalition of the willing.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): To what extent does the 39-member coalition accept that the United States is still the indispensable partner in any so-called peacekeeping operation? Unless a peacekeeping force in Ukraine is ready and prepared to fight and defeat the Russian armed forces, there is no point in it being there. Indeed, as my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) said earlier, it would be just a victim of another tragedy. On that point, to what extent would the primacy of NATO be recognised in any proposed EU-UK defence agreement? Again, we do not want inadvertently to send a message to the United States that NATO is over, we no longer need the Americans and we are going off on our own, because we will not be capable of doing that for decades.

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman is right: NATO is the cornerstone of our European security. That is fundamental and the starting point for any future planning. The potential for the EU and the UK to strike some sort of defence and security pact or agreement is a recognition that the EU and the Commission also have a role to play, and indicates their recognition that the UK needs to be involved in those programmes, and

[John Healey]

industry procurements, and potentially—as the commissioner responsible for this has acknowledged—have access to the schemes and funding that may be available to underpin that.

On the US role, fundamentally what will secure Ukraine's long-term future and a lasting peace is the strength of its own deterrent capacity—the strength of Ukraine, which it has shown in the past three years, to deter any future Russian attacks. That is one of the principal purposes of the planning for a reassurance force. However, as I and the Prime Minister have argued, and as we have said in the House, there is an indispensable role for the US in trying to foster and bring that negotiated peace, as well as in helping to secure it for the long term.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement and his ongoing leadership on this issue. I know that the people of Ukraine will be very pleased and hopeful, given the shared voice across this Chamber. Does he agree that the lesson from Ukraine is that the nature of warfare has changed, and can he confirm that the strategic defence review will incorporate those lessons into its findings?

John Healey: I can indeed. I have been making that argument for some time, before and since the last election. My hon. Friend, who has unique experience, makes the same argument. Ukraine tells us that the nature of warfare is changing. It is changing faster than ever, driven by technology. We have to adopt and incorporate those lessons for our future ability to equip our own armed forces so that they are fit to fight in the way that will be required to deter adversaries and keep us safe.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I congratulate the Defence Secretary on co-chairing the 27th meeting of the Ukraine defence contact group. While it was good to see the German Defence Minister also chairing, that role was carried out until 9 January by the US Secretary of Defence. Defence Secretary Hegseth did attend earlier this month, but it was remote attendance across a secure platform. If we see in the coming weeks any reduction in US air defence support for Ukraine or other matériel, how might the UK respond?

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman has been in the House long enough to know that I cannot possibly—and I will not start to—respond to such hypotheticals. Part of the challenge of the new US Administration to European nations such as the UK was to say, “Step up.” We were stepping up, but we have done more, and we will do more. One of the particular requests from the US Administration was that we take on convening and chairing the uniquely important and successful Ukraine defence contact group—which, the hon. Gentleman is right, was established and chaired up until the change of Administration by the US. We agreed to do that alongside the Germans. That is why the 27th contact group was convened and co-chaired by me and the German Defence Minister.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I am going to get all Members in, but that would be greatly helped if we could have shorter questions.

Blair McDougall (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): Over recess, I delivered a message of solidarity from St Andrew's church in Barrhead to St Andrew church in Bucha, the site of a horrific massacre. It was clear when I was in Kyiv that that brutality has meant the Ukrainians are still determined to fight, but again and again, they raised their concerns about their exposure and their overreliance on American air defence. What can we do to mitigate that, and what consideration has the Secretary of State given to creating an integrated air defence zone in the west of Ukraine?

John Healey: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for being out in Ukraine, demonstrating the solidarity of Government Members and the House in general. As he will have heard in his conversations with the Ukrainians, the overwhelming priority of the civilian population is air defence. That is why the announcement of the £1.6 billion that I put into new short-range air defence missiles—lightweight multi-role missiles, or LMMs—to Ukraine was so important. It is also why the work we have done in recent months alongside Denmark to develop Gravehawk, an innovative new technical system to help reinforce Ukrainian air defence systems that we will be able to roll out more generally, is so important. It is that combination of innovation, industrial speed and partnership with Ukraine that is reinforcing Ukraine's ability to fight for itself and protect itself.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): The Secretary of State rightly began his statement by condemning the Russian missile attack on Sumy on Palm Sunday, which killed civilians and children. However, he will be aware of Russian claims that this was a military target and that 60 Ukrainian military commanders were killed, as were NATO servicemen who were “in charge”. Can he confirm that we will not only provide increased military support to Ukraine, but step up efforts against Russian lies in the information war?

John Healey: I can indeed. These were men, women and children on their way to church; children were killed and severely injured in the attack. Madam Deputy Speaker, I know you want short questions and short answers at this stage.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): With other members of the Foreign Affairs Committee, I was in Ukraine before Easter, and there were three separate air attacks while we were in Kyiv. Fortunately, the air defence in Kyiv is particularly good, but that is not the case elsewhere in the country. Could the Secretary of State say more about how we are supporting Ukraine on air defence and whether we are considering supporting the new Sky Shield system?

John Healey: Alongside drones, we have given the highest priority to what we can do to support air defence systems in Ukraine. I have mentioned some of the recent commitments we have made and deliveries we are undertaking. During the course of 2025, we will develop and deliver more of those.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. He quite rightly drew attention to the huge number of losses of Russian troops in the conflict, and the equally huge number of losses on the Ukrainian side. After the unsuccessful attempt at a ceasefire over Easter, does he see any prospect of anyone else intervening to try to bring about talks between Russia and Ukraine that could lead to a lasting ceasefire and ultimately a settlement? The late Pope Francis tried to intervene, as did the African Union and a number of Latin American leaders. This war cannot go on forever. Somebody has to intervene to try to bring about a process that will lead to a ceasefire that will stop the tragic loss of so many lives.

John Healey: The right hon. Gentleman is right that the war has to end and that there has to be a process that can lead to a political and negotiated settlement. My view, and the Government's view, is that given the momentum behind the American-led negotiations at the moment, the best chance to achieve that is to throw our weight behind those negotiations to try to ensure they succeed.

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): I know that my constituents, not least the Ukrainian families who have found safety in our community, will have been horrified by Russia's conduct over Easter. Does the Secretary of State agree that Russia's actions over the Easter weekend show that Ukraine is still very much in the fight against Russian aggression and that Ukraine deserves our fullest support? Will he reassure the Ukrainian families in my community that that is exactly what Ukraine will have?

John Healey: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's community and the welcome that his constituents have shown to Ukrainian families, who are now part and parcel of the community. I hope his constituents, including the Ukrainians among them, will be reassured by the strength of the House's cross-party support for their continued fight, and by our determination to try to secure a long-term peace in Ukraine.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Does the Defence Secretary believe that reports that the US has withdrawn intelligence sharing with Ukraine are an exaggeration? If not, does he believe that the UK and our trusted partners in the coalition of the willing can do a work-around on intelligence sharing?

John Healey: There was a moment when intelligence sharing with Ukraine was paused, but it was restarted with the momentum behind the talks, at the point at which Ukraine and the US were back on the same page. I am proud to say that the UK played a part in doing that and those arrangements are an important part of Ukraine being able to withstand the onslaught from President Putin.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): To support our Ukrainian friends, we need a robust sovereign industrial base. One proposal to help finance that and enhance supply chain security is the creation of a multilateral armament bank, such as the proposed Defence, Security

and Resilience Bank. Does the Secretary of State agree with me that the Government should explore that potentially game-changing solution?

John Healey: Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend, and we are. That is part of the preparation for the defence industrial strategy. We want to find ways to maximise the investment going to British firms and British jobs, while making an important contribution not just to the defence and security of our own country, but to those of our allies as well.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): The House rightly spends a lot of time talking about Russia, but Russia cannot act without Belarus. Will the Secretary of State update us on the discussions about Belarus's role, and whether that was discussed in his recent meetings?

John Healey: To be quite honest with the hon. Gentleman, Belarus was not discussed. Russia is doing the active invasion and the attacks. Belarus is certainly an ally of President Putin, but not an active participant in this attack on Ukraine.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): In his statement, the Secretary of State was right to link the record level of spending on Ukraine with the opportunities for UK industry, but I am sure he would agree that that opportunity is also a challenge for the scale-up of the industry and the development cycle for new technologies. In addition to the support for innovation and financing, will the Department considering additional measures to support our supply chains to build capability, so that organisations like our own defence cluster in Teesside can take their rightful place in supporting both Ukraine and the UK?

John Healey: We are indeed. My hon. Friend is completely right, and his long experience in industry bears that out. Having a productive capacity that is sovereign and in the UK is one thing, but if it cannot be supplied by the essential components and materials required, the strategic strength is undermined. We are very conscious of that as we develop a new defence industrial strategy, which we have not had in this country since the one produced in 2021.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his statement. Will he set out what recent steps have been taken by the Government to support the Ukrainian prosecutor general in investigating and prosecuting domestic war crimes?

John Healey: The Speaker will be aware of this matter from his recent visit to Ukraine, particularly to Bucha. The hon. Gentleman will know that from the outset, the UK Government, under the previous and current regimes, have continued to support with legal expertise and funding, where it is helpful, the evidence gathering and potential case building that I hope will lead to the prosecutions he wants to see.

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): The Secretary of State spoke of sending a clear signal to Vladimir Putin—I hope that his US counterpart will not take that too literally. Regardless, I would prefer to send

[Cameron Thomas]

drones the way of President Zelensky, and some £25 billion of frozen Russian assets would buy an awful lot of drones. I hear what the Secretary of State says, but I plead with him to take the lead on this and let the Ukrainians win in their finest hour.

John Healey: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says. I hope he heard what I said in response to his Front Bench spokeswoman, the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire), on that issue.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Media reports and statements from representatives of the US Administration in recent days have suggested various options for Ukraine's post-war borders, many of which would see the ceding of Ukrainian sovereign territory. I appreciate that the Defence Secretary will not want to comment on media speculation, but given his commitment to a just and lasting peace in Ukraine, ahead of the talks tomorrow, will he say what the Government's red lines are regarding any peace proposal from the US's mediator that recognises occupied Ukrainian territory as Russian? I include Crimea in that scope.

John Healey: I am sorry to disappoint the hon. Gentleman, but he cites media reports then says that he does not expect me to comment on them, and I will not.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I welcome the fact that the Government have once again stood firm with Ukraine as it fights to defend its territory and send a message to dictators that they cannot change borders by military force. The Secretary of State has been asked twice already about this today, but we are giving €21 billion-worth of munitions and so on to Ukraine, and billions of Russian assets were seized as part of the sanctions we imposed on the regime. We have not had an answer from him yet on what progress is being made on that. Does he not fear, like me, that given the transactional nature of the way in which President Trump approaches these negotiations, those assets could become part of the negotiations, which would mean that Russia could

hold on to them, avoid sanctions and avoid paying for the carnage it has caused in Ukraine?

John Healey: As I said to the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire), work is going on with allies on the question of the Russian assets. Our first focus in the Ukraine defence contact group was on what we could do now, what we could do quickly and what we could do in order to keep Ukraine in the fight today, because it is important that we do not jeopardise the prospects of peace by forgetting about the war. That is where the €21 billion—a record level of commitment—came from in that meeting in Brussels 10 days ago.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Lastly, I call John Cooper.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Sir Edward Leigh: It had better be good!

John Cooper: I had better think of something quick. I will return to the question of fishing. It is right that we draw together with our European allies to fight and to bring this war to an end. However, it cannot be right for the French to leverage in fishing negotiations for defence spending. Will the Secretary of State press on the Prime Minister the need to defend our fragile coastal communities and make it clear to Paris that this cannot be helicopters for haddock or mackerel for missiles?

John Healey: That was worth waiting for. My first focus as Defence Secretary is securing a defence and security agreement and seeing that as the passport to more British firms and British jobs as we play our part in some of the Europe-wide procurement programmes and industrial developments that we need to see.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the Defence Secretary for his statement. I will allow a few moments for the Front Benchers to swap over.

“For Women Scotland” Supreme Court Ruling

5.30 pm

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Bridget Phillipson): With permission, I will now make a statement to update the House on the Supreme Court judgment in the case of *For Women Scotland Ltd v. The Scottish Ministers*.

This ruling brings welcome clarity and confidence for women and service providers. Single-sex spaces must be protected, and this is personal to me; before I was elected to this place, I ran a women’s refuge in the north-east for women and children fleeing domestic violence. I know how important to survivors it is, and always was, to have single-sex spaces based on biology—places of safety after trauma, time in a sanctuary that allowed them therapeutic support, healing from unimaginable male violence and fear. I remember how hard countless campaigners had to fight over many decades to get any single-sex provision at all, in order to create women’s refuges and rape crisis centres. Later, I remember how hard it was to convince commissioners that young homeless women trying to heal from terrifying acts of cruelty should not be left in mixed-sex accommodation. I will continue to fight for that provision to ensure that women’s safety, women’s privacy and women’s dignity are always protected.

This Government will continue as before, working to protect single-sex spaces based on biological sex—now with the added clarity of this ruling—and we will continue our wider work with commitment and compassion to protect all those who need it, right across society. This is a Government who will support the rights of women and trans people, now and always. This is a Government who will support the rights of all people with protected characteristics, now and always. This is a Government who will support the rights of our most vulnerable, now and always. On that, there is no change to announce: dignity and respect for all, now and always.

But this is a judgment long in the making. It began in 2018 when Scottish Ministers issued guidance on the definition of a woman in the eyes of the Gender Representation on Public Boards (Scotland) Act 2018. That guidance stated that a woman in that Act bears the same meaning as a woman in the Equality Act 2010, and included trans women with a gender recognition certificate. *For Women Scotland* challenged that guidance, saying that sex in the Equality Act means biological sex, so that a trans woman with a gender recognition certificate is a man for the purposes of the Act. The case was appealed to the Supreme Court, and last week, the court ruled that sex in the Equality Act means biological sex. This means that a person will be considered as their biological sex for the purposes of the Equality Act, regardless of whether or not they have a gender recognition certificate.

I know that the women who brought this challenge have not always been treated with the respect they deserve. This Government believe in freedom of speech and in the fundamental right to protest, but in no way does that extend to criminal damage. There can be no excuse for defaced statues of feminist icons, no excuse for threats, and no excuse for harassment. Such acts seek to drag down the debate, away from common sense

and the sensible view—held by the majority of the British public—that women need single-sex spaces, that those spaces should be protected, and that we can protect those spaces while treating trans people with respect as well. As such, the certainty that this judgment brings is welcome. Now, it is time to move forward.

There is now a need to ensure that this ruling is clear across a range of settings, from healthcare and prisons to sport and single-sex support groups. The Equality and Human Rights Commission, as Britain’s equality regulator, is working quickly to issue an updated statutory code of practice to reflect this judgment, and I look forward to reviewing that code of practice in due course.

Alongside these updates, our work to protect single-sex spaces across society continues in earnest, because for far too long, under the Conservative Government, single-sex spaces were anything but—and nowhere is that clearer than in our hospitals. Year after year, the Conservatives pledged to close mixed-sex wards; and yet year after year, their use not only persisted but grew massively. Year after year, often in their most vulnerable moments, women were denied the privacy and dignity they deserved. Time after time, Conservative Ministers, including the now Leader of the Opposition, came to this House and toured television studios telling the public that they were protecting single-sex spaces in our hospitals. The truth was very different, because as last year’s data tells us, the use of mixed-sex wards rose by more than 2,200% in 10 years under the last Tory Government. There is no better example of rhetoric divorced from reality and of a party playing politics with the safety of women, and we will never let them forget it. By contrast, this Government will protect women’s wards and NHS England will soon publish guidance on how trans patients should be accommodated in clinical settings. We will end the practice of mixed-sex wards once and for all.

It is not just in our NHS that we will act on behalf of women. In prisons, we will continue to protect women’s safety with single-sex accommodation. In women’s sport, I have always backed integrity and fairness. Biology matters for competitive sport, and sporting bodies have issued rules to reflect that. In our prisons, in our hospitals, in sport and in a whole host of other spaces, what was true before the ruling remains true after the ruling. This Government protect safe spaces for women under the Equality Act 2010.

For too many years, we have seen the heat dialled up in this debate by the Conservatives. There was no real action to protect women’s spaces, while under their watch the use of mixed-sex wards increased, an epidemic of violence against women and girls spread across the country and women’s health was neglected. This Labour Government will deliver for women through our plan for change, driving down waiting lists month after month, tackling misogyny throughout society, and once and for all delivering justice for survivors of violence against women and girls.

I know that many trans people will be worried in the wake of the Supreme Court ruling, so I want to provide reassurance here and now that trans people will continue to be protected. We will deliver a full trans-inclusive ban on conversion practices. We will work to equalise all existing strands of hate crime, and we will review adult gender identity services, so that all trans people get the high-quality care they deserve. The laws to protect trans people from discrimination and harassment will remain

[Bridget Phillipson]

in place, and trans people will still be protected on the basis of gender reassignment—a protected characteristic written into Labour's Equality Act.

This Government will offer trans people the dignity that too often they were denied by the Conservatives. Too often, trans people were a convenient punchbag and the butt of jokes made in this place by the Conservatives, culminating rather shamefully in the previous Prime Minister standing at this Dispatch Box trying to score cheap laughs from his Back Benchers at the expense of vulnerable people. By contrast, this Government are clear that trans people deserve safety, opportunity and respect.

This verdict is about clarity and coherence in the eyes of the law, but the Supreme Court judges delivered along with that verdict a vital reminder: this is not about the triumph of one group at the expense of another. It is not about winners or losers, and it is not about us or them. That is the message I want to reinforce today in this House. Everyone in our society deserves dignity and respect. Those values are not and never will be a zero-sum battle. Dignity and respect for all—those are the values that lift us up and set us free. Those are the values that define and distinguish any modern and compassionate society. Those are the values that this Government will do everything to promote and protect, now and always. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Leader of the Opposition.

5.39 pm

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): I thank the Minister for Women and Equalities for advance sight of her statement, even if it was mostly a shameless work of fiction. I could not believe my eyes, or my ears, this afternoon.

In 2021 the Prime Minister said it was "not right" to say that only women have a cervix. In 2022 he said it was the law that "trans women are women". In 2023 he said, "99% of women don't have a penis". I know what a woman is, and I always have. The people of this country know what a woman is. We did not need the Supreme Court to tell us that, but this Government did: a Labour Government so desperate to jump on a bandwagon that they abandoned common sense, along with the Scottish National party—which put rapists in women's prisons—and, of course, the Liberal Democrats.

The Supreme Court ruling is a powerful victory for the determined women behind For Women Scotland, and for people all over the UK who know how important it is to give privacy and dignity to women and girls who need it, but it follows years of battle. Individual women took action to uphold the law at great personal cost, losing their jobs and their reputations. A few weeks ago I met the Darlington nurses who were forced to bring legal action after a male nurse started using their changing room. Even their union, the Royal College of Nursing, refused to represent them. Women should not have to battle the NHS or their employers through the courts.

Why has it been such a battle? Because something as simple as biological reality became politicised and corrupted by activists pushing this ideology as foolish politicians

cheered. Even the Minister—who said in her statement that this was "personal" to her—stated just last year that men should access women's spaces. Whether it is female victims in our courts being forced to refer to their male sex attackers as "she" or the NHS using confusing "gender-neutral" language, putting the health of women at risk, this is a serious matter.

At every point when we have fought for women, we have faced hostility from activist groups and the Labour party: in 2020, when we rejected Labour's calls to introduce self-identification, and in 2021, when the then Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel), ordered police forces to stop recording offences by trans women in female crime statistics. The current Culture Secretary, the right hon. Member for Wigan (Lisa Nandy), said that crimes committed by men should be recorded how they wished, and that those convicted of serious sexual offences should be held in jails that matched their chosen gender. It was crazy then, and it is crazy now.

I spent years battling abuse from Labour Members as I fought to uphold biological sex in government and blocked the SNP's introduction of its mad self-identity laws, and I will take no lectures from them about what to do on this issue. Women and gay rights groups such as the LGB Alliance were even refused stands at the Labour party conference. The idea that Labour has supported this all along is for the birds. The Foreign Secretary described opponents of self-ID as "dinosaurs". Labour now says that it knows what a woman is, and that transgender people should use services and facilities designated for their biological sex. It has never said that before, and this is a U-turn, but we welcome it.

Now that we have legal clarity, will the Prime Minister show some courage and do the right thing? Will he apologise to the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield), who faced so many security concerns as she was hounded out by the Labour party, and who was rebuked by the Prime Minister, and by many Labour MPs who are sitting there looking at me, for stating what the Supreme Court has now ruled to be true? Will the Minister apologise to the hon. Member for Canterbury? I doubt it. Will the Prime Minister crack down on the groups whom we saw defacing statues of suffragists over the weekend with the same energy that he reserves for his political opponents, or will we see more two-tier justice? Last time we saw Labour MPs standing next to them with no rebuke whatsoever. Will the Minister ensure that the Equality and Human Rights Commission has the Government's full support in its enforcement of the code of practice? In particular, will she condemn the Labour Ministers who described Baroness Falkner's entirely correct position on the judgment as "appalling"?

We need to root out gender ideology from our institutions. This Government now have a serious job to do, as many organisations will still fail women. I ask the following questions. As Minister for Women and Equalities, I published guidance for schools that made it clear that toilets and changing rooms must be provided separately for girls and boys, but the Minister scrapped that guidance. Will she stand up to the unions and urgently publish what she now admits is the law? She has also scrapped relationships, sex and health education guidance that would prevent schools from teaching contested gender ideology as fact. Will she now publish the guidance, and remove materials that mis-state the law? Will she act to

stop passports and licences being issued with information on them about self-declared, rather than legal, sex? Will the Government support our amendments to the data Bill to ensure that digital ID systems record biological sex accurately? Finally, the Minister says that she is here to protect transgender people, many of whom were misled by Labour's mis-statements on this issue. Some are now left very anxious. She has not provided any reassurance, and she should not use them as a shield to protect her failure.

This is not the end of the matter, but the beginning of the end. There is so much to do, and the Conservative party, under my leadership, will be relentless in ensuring that the Government do the right thing.

Bridget Phillipson: I am delighted to see the right hon. Lady in her place today. Many would run from a record like hers on these matters, but not the right hon. Lady. She and the Conservative party had 14 years to provide clarity on the issues that they now claim to take an interest in. The Supreme Court has confirmed that Labour's Equality Act 2010 is the basis for single-sex spaces and protection, but the Conservatives did not provide that clarity. Before I say a bit more about her record, I will say a little more about mine. I will come to the questions—*[Interruption.]* If the right hon. Lady has some patience, I will respond to her questions.

I have supported countless women and children fleeing appalling male violence, sexual violence and domestic abuse. I have campaigned for decades on women's rights. I know more than most about the importance of spaces for women—I have fought for them, I have delivered them and I have run them. While I was running a refuge, and while Labour was delivering the groundbreaking Equality Act, which, as this ruling confirms, sets in law the basis for single-sex spaces, what was the Leader of the Opposition doing? Forever the keyboard warrior, she was busy hacking the website of the leading architect of the Equality Act, and she has learned nothing from her party's crushing electoral defeat last year. She held the post of Minister for Women and Equalities for two years and did precisely nothing. She provided no clarity in the law and nothing to improve the lives of women, which got materially worse on her watch.

The right hon. Lady comes here claiming to speak for women, but let us look at her record and her party's record. There has been an increase in stalking offences. Prosecutions and convictions for domestic abuse have nearly halved since 2015. The rape charge rate is at a record low. Survivors of sexual violence are waiting years for justice. There has been a 2,000% increase in the use of mixed-sex wards in only 10 years. That is the Conservatives' record.

The right hon. Lady asks about the Equality and Human Rights Commission's statutory code of practice. I have set out that I am expecting an updated version of that as soon as possible. I will work with the Equality and Human Rights Commission to implement the code of practice, to make sure that everyone has the clarity that they require, and I expect the EHRC to work quickly and thoroughly on this matter.

The right hon. Lady asks about gender-questioning guidance and RSHE guidance. I am afraid that too is simply laughable. Mere months before the election was called, the Conservatives published a version of the draft guidance for gender-questioning children. Since

that time, we have had the final review by Dr Hilary Cass published. It is right that we ensure that the guidance aligns with Dr Cass's final review.

On the RSHE guidance, the consultation concluded after the election. We could not be clearer that we will always protect single-sex spaces, and we Labour Members are focused on delivering for women. Whereas the Leader of the Opposition has described maternity pay as "excessive" and called the minimum wage "harmful", we are improving protections for pregnant women at work. We are ensuring that women can take maternity leave and come back to good, secure jobs. We are expanding childcare, the first 750 new free breakfast clubs opened today, and we have brought forward the single biggest piece of child protection legislation in a generation to protect young women and girls.

It is Labour's groundbreaking Equality Act that provides the basis for what we have set out today about single-sex spaces for biological women. This Labour Government have a plan for change; a plan that will deliver for women. It is time for the Conservative party to get offline and get on board.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): Far from this ruling providing clarity, trans, intersex and non-binary people are instead anxious and unsure about where this ruling leaves them, legally and practically, as they go about their lives. Does the Minister recognise that this ruling was made without a single contribution from trans people? Will she ensure that trans, intersex and non-binary people are involved in any upcoming new guidance, and if so, how?

Bridget Phillipson: I believe that this ruling provides much-needed clarity. I do recognise the Chair of the Select Committee's concern about ensuring that all people are treated with dignity and respect, including trans people. My expectation is that the EHRC, in the development of the code of practice and the guidance, will engage with a range of stakeholders with different views, and will then set out that work in full.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement. Of course, I respect the independence of the Supreme Court and the ruling it has made, interpreting the law as it stands, just as I respect the concerns of many women, and the now increased fears of the LGBT community. I also respect what the Minister had to say about her experience of working in a refuge, and I agree that there is no length to which we should not go to ensure protection for women who are in the situation that she describes. However, given what she said, I am sure that she will agree with me that that should not come at the cost of the human rights and the security of another vulnerable group in society, which is what this ruling threatens to bring about. Could she explain where transgender people fleeing violence can now go for refuge, if they are to be completely excluded from refuges?

[Christine Jardine]

For years, we have had this intolerable debate, in which two vulnerable groups have been pitted against each other. Those two groups are afraid of the same thing—violence, mostly from men. The challenge for this Labour Government is to live up to the spirit of perhaps one of the proudest achievements of a previous Labour Government—the Equality Act—and protect everyone. If this Government are not able to do that, does the Minister think it would be acceptable to see trans women forced into men's toilets, to face goodness knows what sort of aggression, and potentially violence, there? Will she confirm what she says about protecting trans rights? We need some leadership from this Government. I have written to the Minister and asked her if we will see legislation that gives that protection, because we must remember that what we are dealing with here is not hypothetical. It is about real lives, real fears and real concerns among the LGBT community. Equality and human rights should never be the preserve of one—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order.

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. As she says, she has written to me on this topic, and I or a member of the ministerial team would be happy to meet her to discuss this further.

Where we can agree is that dignity and respect should be for all in our country—for women and for trans people—and trans people should not face discrimination or harassment on the basis of who they are. However, I believe that ensuring a society that treats everyone with dignity and respect is entirely compatible with ensuring that single-sex spaces can continue to exist for biological women who require safety and dignity, particularly following periods of terrible abuse. It is important that services are available for trans people in addition, and it is often the case that those services are much better provided by those with the specialist knowledge and expertise to deliver them.

I agree that this should not be seen as a conflict. The ruling from the Supreme Court, while being clear about the importance of biological sex, was at pains to stress that trans people do retain clear protections in law, and should be able to live their life free of harassment and discrimination.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): I have already been contacted by several LGBTQ+ and trans organisations in my constituency of Monmouthshire that are really concerned and frightened about the implications of this judgment. Will the Minister commit to meeting trans people from my constituency, such as those from Queerspace, Abergavenny Pride and Monmouth Pride, to hear their concerns about the impact of this ruling?

Bridget Phillipson: I note my hon. Friend's concern, and I can assure her that I will continue to meet a range of stakeholders in this important area, because I agree with her that no one should face prejudice or discrimination because of who they are. That is why we are working with the Home Office to deliver our commitment to equalising all existing strands of hate crimes and making them aggravated offences. We will work right across this House to ensure that, while we maintain single-sex

spaces for biological women, trans people have the support and respect they deserve, including in access to healthcare services.

Shivani Raja (Leicester East) (Con): Will the Secretary of State take action to ensure that policies and lessons in schools are not led by external organisations that have been captured by contested gender ideology?

Bridget Phillipson: As I set out in my response to the Leader of the Opposition, we will publish revised guidance for RSHE. It is an important principle that parents should understand what is being taught to their children at school, and we will ensure that that is maintained.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Over the last few days, the number of calls to Switchboard, the national LGBT+ helpline in my constituency, has skyrocketed. The callers are in fear of what this ruling means for them. Trans people who are frightened to use public loos today know that the overwhelming threat to women and to all the trans community is the violence that we suffer from cis men. Does the Minister agree that we should all be clear about that?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree that male violence remains a very serious challenge that we face as a country, and it is a challenge this Labour Government are determined to confront. The ruling of the Supreme Court was clear about the importance of biological sex, but I would not want any trans person in my right hon. Friend's constituency, or anywhere across the country, to be fearful. I believe that everyone has the right to be treated with dignity and respect, and should not face discrimination or harassment. That is why we will back the police in ensuring that action is taken against anyone who behaves in that way.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I would be grateful if the Minister focused on her Government and the future implications of this judgment. In her statement, she said that "NHS England will soon publish guidance on how trans patients should be accommodated in clinical settings." I will read to her what the Worcestershire acute hospitals NHS trust has in its guidance:

"Patients should always be treated as the gender they identify as, regardless of what their transition looks like or how long they have shared their gender identity with others... Patients should always be in an environment that aligns with their gender identity." Would she say to this trust that it needs to act very quickly to change that guidance?

Bridget Phillipson: My colleagues and officials in the Department of Health and Social Care are in contact with NHS England to ensure that guidance is set out rapidly to provide the clarity required after the Supreme Court judgment. If the hon. Lady shares with me the detail of what she has just read out, I will happily make sure that that is investigated further.

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the ruling from the Supreme Court and the Minister's statement. The Supreme Court has been clear that "sex" in the Equality Act 2010 means biological sex. The question now turns to how we make sure that the Equality Act is properly understood and implemented. How will the Minister ensure that public bodies, third-sector

organisations, sports bodies, regulated sectors and so on comply with the Act, so that women's safety, privacy and dignity are protected?

Bridget Phillipson: As I said, we will work with the EHRC to provide further guidance to service providers, including through the update to the statutory code of practice. We expect the EHRC to do that as rapidly as possible, recognising that this is a thorough and detailed piece of work. But it is important that service providers, arising from this Supreme Court ruling, now have the clarity and confidence that was always there in the Equality Act 2010.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The Supreme Court's ruling goes a long way to guarantee the rights and safety of women and girls. Does the Minister agree that the judgment highlights why it is now right for the SNP Government finally to ditch the divisive gender self-ID agenda once and for all, and proves it was totally wrong for Scottish Labour to back the SNP Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill?

Bridget Phillipson: My understanding is that the Scottish Government do not intend to progress their gender recognition reforms. My officials will work with the EHRC, which in turn will work with the Scottish Government. I believe that Scottish Ministers have indicated that they wish to engage with the EHRC on the guidance, which is an important and welcome development.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I am proud to represent a constituency that shows tolerance to people from all backgrounds, unlike the political hot potato the issue has become in this place and in political dialogue. I have a constituent who transitioned in the 1970s. She has used female toilets for more of her life than any other toilets. Are we saying that her dignity and the respect the Minister talked about will be in any way improved if there is a ban on her using the toilets she has been using for so many years?

Bridget Phillipson: The Supreme Court ruling made it clear that the provision of single-sex spaces is on the basis of biological sex, but what I would say to my hon. Friend and her constituent is that the development of the code of practice, which the EHRC will set out, will make sure that businesses and others will ensure dignity and respect for all, and that there is appropriate provision, including the use of toilet facilities, so that no one, including trans people, must feel unsafe when they use public toilets.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Everyone must be able to access services with their dignity upheld and privacy respected, including women and trans people, but following the Supreme Court ruling many people are feeling confused and concerned. We must not allow it to lead to further heated arguments and toxicity. What steps is the Minister taking to develop the critical guidance needed to give businesses and public bodies clarity on how the ruling should be implemented, so that everyone is treated with the dignity they deserve?

Bridget Phillipson: We will work with the EHRC on that guidance. It will present a revised code of practice, which I will review and present in due course. It is important that it does that as quickly as possible but, as I have said, this is a complex area and it must be undertaken thoroughly, with engagement with a range of stakeholders, including businesses, for the reasons the hon. Lady identifies.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): Far from clarity, the verdict raises as many questions as it answers. Indeed, it has been referred to by the civil servant Melanie Field, who oversaw the Equality Act's drafting and passage, as having significantly reinterpreted Parliament's intentions. These questions are primarily about the purpose now of the gender recognition certificate and whether exclusion from single-sex spaces is merely lawful or required. But in protecting women's spaces such as toilets from predatory men pretending to be trans women, what exactly stops those same men from now accessing them by pretending to be trans men?

Bridget Phillipson: I understand the concern my hon. Friend expresses and why she raises those questions, but I have to say to her that the position of the Government is that the Supreme Court has provided clarity and confidence in this area, particularly where it comes to single-sex spaces being on the basis of biological sex. The basis for that was the Equality Act, introduced by the previous Labour Government.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I am pleased to get the clarity from the Supreme Court judgment. Those of us on the Conservative Benches have always known what a woman is. The right hon. Lady says the Government will ensure that public services are fully compliant with the legislation, which is good. She talked about NHS single-sex wards and the provision for biological females and biological males. Can she confirm whether that means trans women will be cared for on male wards?

Bridget Phillipson: The basis for NHS provision, and the basis for single-sex services of all kinds, will be on the basis of biological sex.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): May I first welcome and thank the Minister for the measured way she delivered the statement, but also for her robust work on this issue? Last week's landmark Supreme Court judgment provided not only clarity, but some long-overdue common sense. For too long, the issue has at times been toxic and has caused a great deal of harm to both women and trans people. Will she confirm that her Department is liaising with the EHRC to seek assurances that it will not only work at pace, but set some clear timelines on updating the statutory guidance? Will she also ensure that any guidance that is now unlawful is withdrawn?

Bridget Phillipson: I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that we will work as quickly as possible with the EHRC in this important area. I also think she is right to highlight the importance of good temper when it comes to different views on this topic, recognising that people have had strongly held views over a number of years and respecting one another, and, where we disagree, we do not descend into hate-filled rhetoric or

[Bridget Phillipson]

involve ourselves in unfortunate and deeply regrettable protests, some of which have involved the defacement of statues. Now is the opportunity, arising from the Supreme Court judgment, to draw a line under this and ensure that the right guidance is in place and that there is clarity for all.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I appreciate the Minister's words about reducing the temperature. An awful lot of people are hurting a huge amount this week as a result of the announcement. I appreciate the commitment to reduce the temperature and hope that everybody will sign up to that. The SNP welcomes the clarity offered on the definition in the Equality Act, notes the judgment's points of interaction between the 2010 Act and the Gender Recognition Act 2004, and notes the commitment of the Minister and the EHRC to deliver as quickly as possible the guidance on the new code of practice. I would like to ask her if and when she will be replying to the letter, sent by the Scottish Government, seeking an early meeting with the UK Government. I urge her to undertake that meeting as soon as possible, please.

Bridget Phillipson: I would of course be happy to engage with colleagues from the Scottish Government. I will respond to that letter as quickly as I can.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Wyre) (Lab): I am very conscious that I represent many trans, intersex and non-binary constituents, and that the representations made to me in my office over the past few days have had a very clear message that they are feeling particularly victimised and quite scared for their own safety. Some are trans women and some are trans men, who seem to be very much lost from this debate. The one thing that really unites them is that they are worried about their day-to-day safety, so can I ask the Minister to provide some assurance to trans people right across the country that the Equality Act is still there and can protect them from discrimination and harassment?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. They retain protection from discrimination and harassment. I can say very clearly to this House that trans people should not be victims of discrimination or harassment. They deserve dignity and respect. That is why it is important that we also ensure that trans people have access to high-quality healthcare services and that we clamp down on hate crimes, including those targeted at LGBT people.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): I welcome the Supreme Court's ruling and congratulate For Women Scotland and others who have campaigned tirelessly on this issue despite the abuse, threats and attempts to silence them. Will the Minister please confirm what discussions the Prime Minister or anyone on the Labour Front Bench at the time had with Anas Sarwar, the Scottish Labour leader, when he whipped his MSPs to vote in favour of the SNP's Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill? Do those on the Labour Front Bench now regret some of their previous decisions, when they sided against women across the country who were voicing their very real concerns?

Bridget Phillipson: Where I can agree with the hon. Lady is that no one should face threats, intimidation or harassment for expressing their views—that is an important principle of freedom of speech in our country, but it should not cross a line. On the approach we take in Scotland, the leader of the Scottish Labour party has indicated that he welcomes and supports the Supreme Court judgment.

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): I do not know whether anyone else in the House has butch lesbian friends and has been with them when they have been told to get out of women's toilets, but I have—it is not pleasant; it is not nice. The people who are using this as a political football again should be ashamed of themselves. People do not understand: they are saying that trans women have to use men's toilets and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols) said, trans men then have to use women's toilets, but how will they stop them? Will they ask to see their genitalia? It makes no sense. Is my right hon. Friend aware that service providers for refugees, which provide a vital service for women in desperate need and often use their discretion, are now fearful that they will no longer be able to use their discretion when providing those services?

Bridget Phillipson: The Supreme Court judgment set out that single-sex spaces are provided on the basis of biological sex. I do recognise the concern that my hon. Friend raises—lesbians should not be treated in a discriminatory way, and we must ensure that there are toilets and facilities available for everyone in our country. Additional clarity on the areas she has identified will be provided through the guidance the EHRC will set out.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): In some ways, the biggest question today is why it took a Supreme Court decision to confirm this position in the Equality Act. I have heard from so many women who are considering standing as candidates but are reluctant to do so because of the toxicity in public life, and I think this debate is probably one of the most toxic in terms of misogyny. I am lucky: I am a man, and I have not experienced it to the same extent—nowhere near what women have experienced. Will the Minister take this moment to stand up for all women who have campaigned on this issue, reject the abuse and hostility that has been put towards them, restate the importance of their dignity and of respect, and thank For Women Scotland for the work it has done in taking this forward?

Bridget Phillipson: I do recognise the hon. Gentleman's good intentions in asking that question, but I would say to him that, like many women in this House, I have experienced that too. We know what it is like as women to face that kind of abuse. We must recognise that there can be no place for such abuse in public life and that we have a responsibility to change that culture and climate and to encourage women to come forward and stand for elected office.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Since I have been in this House, I have felt the force of the lobby that has made people and MPs across this House stand there and say that trans women are women. Last week the Supreme Court said that sex in the Equality Act is actually biological sex, and I welcome that. What is the

Minister going to do to deal with the type of damage that Mermaids and Stonewall caused to a generation, during 14 years of a Tory Government? What steps will she take to rectify the damage that they have done to a generation of trans and gender-questioning children?

Bridget Phillipson: I recognise my hon. Friend's long-standing interest and campaigning in this area. She is right that the Supreme Court judgment provides clarity on biological sex. When it comes to support for gender-questioning children, when we are talking about children and young people, this has to be about their wellbeing. We are often talking about young people who are very vulnerable and experiencing real difficulties in their lives. The Hilary Cass review made it clear that young people in that situation need support and protection. That is why we will also publish revised gender-questioning guidance for our schools this year to provide that necessary further clarity.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): First, I would like to ask the Minister how we are all going to be asked to prove our birth sex. As the hon. Member for Brent East (Dawn Butler) said, this is not just about people who are transgender, non-binary and intersex; it is also about people who do not conform to gender stereotypes. One of my constituents has told me:

"It seems I am to be ghettoised into trans spaces",

while another said that

"this ruling sends a message that trans people do not belong... however much we contribute".

What does the Minister suggest I say to those constituents, and will she join me and the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) in meeting Dorset's Space Youth Project for LGBT young people when it visits Parliament next week?

Bridget Phillipson: I would say to the hon. Lady's constituents and to trans people across the country that the ruling was clear that while single-sex spaces are on the basis of biological sex, trans people retain protection from discrimination and harassment in law, and that the Government will always ensure that trans people have the dignity and respect they deserve.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): Research shows that half of trans people already fear using public toilets, so I am deeply concerned about the impact of comments by the Minister and the Prime Minister's spokesperson that trans people should use a toilet that many of them would not feel comfortable or safe in. Can I ask: how would trans people's exclusion from the toilets they have long used be a proportionate means of achieving a legitimate aim, as the Supreme Court judgment and Equality Act dictate? Would the Minister like to clarify that there is, in fact, nothing in law that requires trans women to use men's toilets, trans men to use women's toilets, or non-binary people to use a toilet corresponding with the sex they were assigned at birth?

Bridget Phillipson: The Supreme Court's judgment was clear on biological sex, but I do understand and recognise the need to ensure that there is provision in place for everyone in our society, including toilet facilities. That is why many businesses and service providers provide unisex facilities, while many service providers will also put in place enclosed bathrooms that do not

require people to make that decision to ensure that their dignity and privacy are respected. That is important for all people in our country.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): I have a practical question: does the ruling apply retrospectively? If, for example, someone was to have lost their job for their views or won a title in sport, would it apply retrospectively—yes or no?

Bridget Phillipson: I think the hon. Gentleman is referring to employment law cases, on which I would have to defer to legal colleagues. The judgment set out that the Equality Act 2010 is the basis for single-sex spaces being determined on the basis of biology. The Court determined that that was always the case and had always been the case since 2010—it was his party that failed to provide that clarity over 14 years.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): The unanimous Supreme Court judgment has provided clarity over the application of the Equality Act 2010. It is incredibly important that hard-earned women's rights and single-sex spaces are protected, while also protecting our trans community, who continue to face considerable discrimination; there needs to be a solution whereby they, too, are treated with dignity. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this entire issue needs to be handled with a great deal of sensitivity and sensibility, rather than being treated as a political football or a culture war issue?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree that the Supreme Court judgment provides much-needed clarity and certainty, including for service providers. I also agree that we need to ensure that this matter is handled with sensitivity; in particular, we have had a number of exchanges in this House where we have talked about children who might be gender-questioning and might be experiencing significant issues affecting their wellbeing. I want to make sure that right across society, women have the access to single-sex spaces that they need and deserve and, as my hon. Friend has said, they have long campaigned for. I also want to ensure that trans people receive the appropriate support, including healthcare, and do not face discrimination or harassment on the basis of who they are.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): While the Supreme Court ruling brings clarity to some, it brings undeniable fear and uncertainty to others. The Minister's statement today still leaves vulnerable trans people lost in a maze of complex equalities law. She talks about dignity and respect. Let us look at our prison system, which is just one setting for which her Government are responsible. It is dangerously dysfunctional. What safeguards will now be strengthened so that no trans person is placed in greater danger as a direct result of this ruling?

Bridget Phillipson: I am afraid that I disagree with the right hon. Lady that the ruling was complex. It was straightforward and very clear, and has provided clarity that has been sadly lacking for many years. Of course it is important that vulnerable prisoners receive the support they need, but single-sex spaces are determined, as the Supreme Court has ruled, on the basis of biological sex. Where there are vulnerable prisoners, different situations may need to be put in place, separate from that arrangement.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I am quite frankly astounded that the Leader of the Opposition seeks to portray herself as a champion of women's rights when she has refused to recognise the reality of discrimination and harassment of women, and has stripped the funding from so many of the services that protect women. I pay tribute to the many Members of this Chamber who have worked publicly and privately to protect single-sex spaces and the rights and dignity of trans people. The judgment clarifies that single-sex spaces do not have to offer services to trans women, but can my right hon. Friend the Minister say whether they are obliged to refuse services to them?

Bridget Phillipson: Spaces that operate on a single-sex basis must do so on the basis of biological sex, but of course providers can offer inclusive services, should they choose to do so, so long as they are clear about who they are offering their services to. I agree with my hon. Friend that the last Government had a shameful record on the prosecution of rape and of domestic violence; at that time in this country, rape was all but decriminalised.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): I am sure the Minister will recognise that there are many women, including former supporters of her own party, who voted for candidates like me entirely because of our record of supporting biological women. However, in the meantime, given that a number of trade unions claim that they will ignore the ruling of the Supreme Court, and in some cases even campaign against it, what plans do the Government have to ensure that all trade unions are made to recognise that the Supreme Court ruling applies to them too?

Bridget Phillipson: I do not know where the hon. Lady has been since July, but her party suffered a devastating general election defeat. That is why she is sat over there on the Opposition Benches rather than here on the Government Benches.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): Many of my trans, intersex and non-binary residents in Exeter and their relatives have been in touch with me to express their concern and fear after the decision last week. I know that my right hon. Friend mentioned this in her opening statement, but will she recommit to our ambitious agenda to advance the dignity and respect of trans people over the course of this Parliament?

Bridget Phillipson: I understand my hon. Friend's concern. What I would say to his constituents and to trans people across our country is that we are working with the Home Office to deliver our commitment to equalise all existing strands of hate crime to make them aggravated offences. We will also bring forward a draft conversion practices Bill, in line with the King's Speech and our manifesto, that will be trans-inclusive. We are clear that that ban must not cover legitimate psychological support, treatment or non-directive counselling, but we are clear that conversion practices are abuse and we will legislate to stop them.

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): Many people are feeling deeply worried about the Supreme Court judgment and what it means for their ability to live their

lives in dignity and in privacy. Will the Minister make a commitment to uphold trans people's fundamental rights, including the right to privacy, given that the Gender Recognition Act 2004 was created in part to do that? The Supreme Court ruling risks dismantling that by forcing trans people to out themselves multiple times a day whenever they visit the toilet, including in their workplace, in public buildings, or, indeed, in hospital.

Bridget Phillipson: I am sorry, but I disagree with the questions that the hon. Lady poses. The ruling from the Supreme Court was clear, setting out that while single-sex spaces are to be delivered on the basis of biological sex, trans people must be free to live their lives free of discrimination and harassment and must retain clear protections within law.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield Hallam) (Lab): The Minister will know that there is considerable concern and fear among transgender, intersex and non-binary people across the UK, including in my constituency. Will she outline what urgent steps the Government are taking to reassure my trans and non-binary constituents that it is their right to remain protected under UK law? What is she doing to ensure that the ruling is not misinterpreted or misused to undermine those constituents' dignity, safety and access to services, and that it does not lead to discrimination on a wide scale, including through wrongly challenging people who are trying to go about their lives in our communities?

Bridget Phillipson: The rights of trans people are respected and retained following the Supreme Court judgment. The ruling was very clear about that, and it is important that we emphasise that point here today. Alongside that, we will ensure that hate crime is properly recorded and punished, because trans people and all people in our country deserve to live their lives free from discrimination, harassment and hate.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): Patients deserve to be treated not only in single-sex wards, but—especially when they are having intimate examinations—by clinicians of the gender and sex that they wish. Is the Minister as concerned as I am about the General Medical Council carrying on with its policy to remove and hide biological sex from the medical register? What discussions is she having with the GMC and the other medical regulators about this issue?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree that it is important that patients have the right to single-sex provision, including around clinical treatment, but the hon. Gentleman might want to have a word with the Leader of the Opposition about the massive increase in the use of mixed-sex wards under his party in government.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Ind): In Britain today, trans women are denied safe housing, refused essential healthcare and left waiting years for gender-affirming treatment. This is not accidental; it is the result of a climate of hostility against a marginalised community, fuelled by people in positions of power, including in this very Chamber. Let me be clear: trans people are not a debate, a culture war or an ideology; they are human beings, and trans rights are human rights. Will this Government ensure that they do not

pander to hate? Will they reverse their damaging roll-back of LGBT+ rights, including the ban on puberty blockers, and unequivocally defend the Equality Act and the protections that it provides for trans people across the UK?

Bridget Phillipson: The hon. Lady asked a number of questions. What I can say to her is that trans people, of course, deserve to be treated with dignity and respect, and they retain rights to live their lives free of discrimination and harassment, as set out in the Supreme Court judgment. She asked about puberty blockers. I am afraid that there will be no change to Government policy in that important area.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Now that we have confirmation from the Supreme Court of what the definition of a woman is, can the Minister confirm that all public sector and private sector bodies will apply that definition with immediate effect?

Bridget Phillipson: The Equality and Human Rights Commission will set out a statutory code of practice that will provide further clarity. But I would just say to the hon. Gentleman that I will take no lectures from his party about the importance of defending women’s rights, given that one of his own number who sits on those Benches was convicted of and went to prison for assaulting his former partner.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): There are some days when I am really proud to be an MP and to witness the level of debate in this Chamber, and there are some days like today—when, quite frankly, the Leader of the Opposition was absolutely appalling. She continues to talk over people, to not listen and to laugh at people while they are talking about an issue that is very, very serious. People out there are scared as a result of this judgment. *[Interruption.]* Could you maybe let me speak? I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker: will the Leader of the Opposition afford me the politeness of not speaking over me? My question, and I will ask a question—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I do appreciate that feelings are running high in this statement, but I say to the hon. Lady: please do ask your question and put it on the record.

Emily Darlington: The debate we have in this Chamber is listened to by people who are scared. The behaviour of the Leader of the Opposition has been to talk over people and laugh at people, and when cis-men violence was mentioned, there was laughter on the Opposition Benches. That does not reassure women or trans women in this country. Does the Minister agree?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree that these matters are sensitive, and when we discuss them it generates strong feelings. It is, of course, right that we in this House are able to engage in robust discussion, including on issues that may at times be difficult. I accept my hon. Friend’s point: we do need to treat one another with respect and understand the need—

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): Follow your own advice then.

Bridget Phillipson: So much for dignity and respect, eh?

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): I welcome the clear ruling from the Supreme Court, and I thank the Minister for her statement, but I am really disappointed that there was no mention of schools at all in the statement. Many schools are teaching gender ideology as if it is fact and are not providing single-sex facilities or single-sex sports teams. How will she ensure that schools now comply with the ruling and the law as it has always been?

Bridget Phillipson: I suggest to the hon. Lady that she review *Hansard* after this statement.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): Following the welcome clarity from the Supreme Court that Labour’s Equality Act has always contained the right to single-sex spaces for women as well as protections for trans people, does the Minister agree that the SNP Scottish Health Secretary must urgently get a grip and ensure that the NHS is upholding the law, especially in my area of Fife where it appears that a nurse, Sandie Peggie, was disciplined by NHS managers for trying to exercise her right to use a single-sex changing room?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend will understand that I am not in a position to comment on ongoing cases, but I can say to her that I agree that the Supreme Court ruling demonstrated that the Equality Act introduced by the last Labour Government is the basis on which single-sex provision based on biological sex should be delivered.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): The Minister says that the ruling provides clarity, but for the trans constituents I met and corresponded with over the weekend it provides anxiety and fear. Last week, a local media outlet, *The Stray Ferret*, published an article documenting a 60% increase in trans hate crime in the last decade in North Yorkshire alone. I and many others worry that the rhetoric and language around this issue will only fuel that. Can the Minister confirm how the Government will ensure that trans people, who are already disproportionately targeted, are not marginalised further and that the upcoming EHRC guidance addresses safety and inclusion as seriously as it does this legal clarity?

Bridget Phillipson: The Supreme Court ruling was clear, but the hon. Member is right that there can be no place for hate or for people to be targeted on that basis. It is important that action is taken against those who perpetrate hate crime.

Maya Ellis (Ribble Valley) (Lab): Like many of my colleagues today, I am truly exhausted by the cynicism of the culture wars around this topic. I hope we can focus on how we make any changes work practically. Does the Minister agree that all of us in this House should be mindful that human beings are affected by every comment we make on this matter, and that how we behave here will inform how the wider public behave, which I hope would be with kindness and compassion?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree that everyone in our society should be treated with dignity, compassion and respect. The Supreme Court ruling, while setting out its position on biological sex, was also clear that trans people retain

[Bridget Phillipson]

important protections in law, including where it applies to discrimination and harassment. I do believe it is important that all of us share that message as we understand the ruling and make sure that it is well understood across our country. The last thing that any of us would want is for trans people to be fearful.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I want everyone treated with dignity and respect, as the Supreme Court made clear should be the case. But should women have to rely on a court ruling, followed by guidance at some point from the EHRC, rather than the clear view of this House? What would be the Government's view of having primary legislation in this area rather than relying on a court ruling?

Bridget Phillipson: The Supreme Court's ruling was that the Equality Act, which was passed by this House, is the basis for the protections that exist in law on the basis of biological sex.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I have had very constructive discussions with constituents on both sides of this debate. Does the Minister agree that those who seek to promote trans rights with sexually aggressive placards or through aggressively threatening women who disagree with them in the most disgusting ways, as we have all seen, do tremendous harm to the trans cause and should realise how counterproductive their slogans are to the cause they are attempting to promote?

Bridget Phillipson: No one should be targeted through vile placards containing abuse or hate. I agree with my hon. Friend; he is absolutely right that not only is it wrong, but it is completely counterproductive and does nothing to advance the discussion that those presenting the placards would wish to be advanced. While I understand that people have strong opinions in this area, it is important that any discussion or debate does not take us to hate-filled rhetoric, threats or threats of violence or intimidation.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): The Minister says that her position on these issues is very clear and has not changed at all over the years. She is promising to work at pace now, yet nine months into her time as Education Secretary the guidance on gender-questioning children that was consulted on over a year ago has still not been published. Will she help schools by answering this question: can it ever be right for a school to socially transition a child without talking to the parents first?

Bridget Phillipson: We will set out guidance this year for gender-questioning children. It is important, because—*[Interruption.]* I will answer the question. I will answer it directly if the Opposition Front Bench would just allow me a moment. We will publish the guidance later this year. I recognise the importance of providing clarity to school leaders. We inherited a draft version, and it was important that we looked at it and engaged with stakeholders following the final Cass review. But yes, I do agree that it is important that parents are involved in important decisions about their children's lives. Alongside that, potential safeguarding considerations will always need to be taken into account. That is why we are

looking at these areas very carefully to make sure that we get it right and we provide the clarity that schools leaders are quite rightly asking for.

Chris Ward (Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven) (Lab): The Minister is absolutely right that we need to conduct this debate with respect and compassion, because ultimately this is about people's lives and their rights. That is why there is such concern in the trans community at the moment, including in my Brighton Kemptown constituency, which has the largest trans community in the country. Can she confirm two things for me? First, how will she ensure that trans people have faith that their existing legal protections will be upheld and not rowed back on? Secondly, how will the Government ensure that trans voices are heard as public bodies roll out their response to the ruling?

Bridget Phillipson: On the two areas that my hon. Friend asks about, trans people absolutely retain important protections in law, and the ruling of the Supreme Court puts that beyond doubt. To the question about ensuring that trans voices are heard, it will be important that the EHRC engages with a range of voices as part of its consultation in developing the code of practice that will be required to provide further clarity. I am confident that that will happen.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Given that article 2 of the Windsor framework ridiculously requires Northern Ireland to be in dynamic alignment with EU equality directives, which include embracing self-identification, what steps will the Government take to ensure that this common-sense ruling of the Supreme Court is applied consistently and without adulteration across the whole United Kingdom now and always?

Bridget Phillipson: I will review the hon. and learned Gentleman's question and write to him with a full response.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): The Supreme Court asked that politicians not weaponise their interpretation of law set down by Parliament—it is almost like it had anticipated the Leader of the Opposition. The public are watching, and wherever they stand on this debate, they are not seeing a potential Prime Minister in the Leader of the Opposition.

Because trans people are worried and scared, it is important to give reassurance. The Supreme Court clearly said that trans people remain protected under the Equality Act, regardless of whether they have a gender recognition certificate. The Supreme Court said that it could not rule on the definition of a woman beyond its use in the Equality Act. My constituents who are trans and their allies are deeply scared. Will the Minister stand at the Dispatch Box and repeat her support for trans people in my constituency and around our country?

I repeat the invitation mentioned by my friend the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade). At my invitation, young trans people from Bournemouth and Dorset are coming to this place to know that this is their Parliament, that they have a place here, and that they will be listened to, respected and have dignity. Will my right hon. Friend or another Minister come and meet them?

Bridget Phillipson: If my hon. Friend can provide me with additional details about his request, I will review that. I agree with him about the importance of reassurance that trans people should be free to live their lives with compassion, dignity and respect. The ruling of the Supreme Court made it clear that they retain legal protections; it is important that we all convey that.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): I thank the Minister for her statement and her emphasis on the need for sensitivity and indeed good temper in dealing with this topic. In that spirit, may I ask her to salute the courage of J. K. Rowling, Sharron Davies and indeed the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield)?

Bridget Phillipson: Over many decades, fantastic women have campaigned for the protection and creation of single-sex spaces, have fought against violence against women and girls, and have led some brilliant campaigns. I pay tribute to all those women—many of them are unsung heroes whose names we will never hear anywhere and will never be mentioned in the Chamber—for their fantastic campaigning efforts. It is only because of the amazing work of feminists from the 1970s onwards that we have rape crisis centres and women's refuges.

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement and put on record my thanks to For Women Scotland for its tireless work over a number of years. It was the public face of many women who have experienced discrimination, abuse and personal loss for making the argument that the Supreme Court made last Wednesday. The Supreme Court held up the rights of lesbians to be able to associate with same-sex attracted women. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that lesbians and gay men can associate without facing challenge?

Bridget Phillipson: The Supreme Court ruling makes that clear and provides the clarity that many, including lesbians and gay men, have been asking for. The EHRC statutory code of practice will provide further clarity. But I agree with my hon. Friend that no one should have faced abuse, intimidation or harassment for expressing their legitimately held opinions.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): While the Scottish National party may see this as a judgment made by judicial bigots, most people will see it as a decision of common sense and will wonder why the courts had to decide what was a man and what was a woman. But given the intolerant, threatening and violent response from the trans lobby, will the Minister assure us that the judgment will not be undermined by the guidance she issues to the House and that vulnerable people, sports teams, hospital patients, teachers and children will be protected and not adversely affected as they have been in the past? Will she also assure us that it will be raised at the highest level of Government that Northern Ireland must be included in these protections?

Bridget Phillipson: The Supreme Court judgment was clear, and it is welcome and necessary, but it also set out that the basis for protection for single-sex spaces is rooted in the Equality Act. Those provisions were always there, but now we have the clarity that many have been calling for.

While I note the right hon. Member's understandable concern about the behaviour of a minority that crosses a line into conduct that is potentially criminal and certainly unacceptable, we do need to tread with just a bit of care not to lump everyone into that category; I am sure that was not his intention. While there can be no place for intimidation or threats, or threats of violence, people do have the right to express their opinions in line with our long-standing right to freedom of speech.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): The Equality Act is a vital piece of legislation that is there to protect the essential rights of oppressed groups, including women and trans people, in a world that is still far too dominated by sexism and bigotry, including transphobia. I used the Equality Act plenty of times to represent people as a lawyer before I came to this place. The House will no doubt discuss the impact of the recent Court judgment again, but as we look online and at some of the media, can we try to ensure that the debate respects all groups, including trans people? Some of the stuff spilling out of the right-wing press and online in recent days has been truly awful. That has been raised with me by trans constituents who are just trying to get on with their lives.

Bridget Phillipson: The Equality Act was one of the last Labour Government's proudest achievements in ensuring that people are able to live their life free from discrimination, prejudice and harassment. I agree with my hon. Friend on recognising that important landmark piece of legislation. When we discuss what can be difficult and sensitive issues for some, we should understand that, as he said, people simply want to get on and live their life free from discrimination, harassment and abuse.

Lewis Cocking (Bromley) (Con): In 2022, as I was sitting at Wormley community centre telling for the local elections, a woman said to me, "I've just voted Conservative because you are the only party that knows what a woman is," so the British people really do care about this. Will the Minister be more specific on when she will issue guidance to schools about gender-questioning children?

Bridget Phillipson: As I have said on a number of occasions in the House, we will issue that guidance this year.

Tristan Osborne (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): I welcome the clarification and statement from my right hon. Friend. The way in which she has dealt reasonably with questions in the House is testament to her fortitude and ability. A number of groups in my constituency have made representations, including Hilary Cooke from Medway Pride and women's advocacy groups. There is a worry around some of the elements to do with harassment and discrimination—a concern that some might take an opportunity to target the trans community. Will she guarantee that Labour's Equality Act will stand, and will prevent abuse, harassment and discrimination?

Bridget Phillipson: The Equality Act does stand, and it provides clear protections in law for women and trans people. It is important that women have access to single-sex spaces such as women's refuges and rape crisis centres, but it is also important, of course, that

[Bridget Phillipson]

trans people have access to high-quality healthcare and appropriate support services—and, in addition, can see the police taking action against hate crime.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): A man is a man and a woman is a woman. Anybody watching this at home will think that the lunatics have taken over the asylum, which they quite clearly have. I do not need a Supreme Court judgment or ruling to tell me that a bloke should not be in a women's changing room. I want to ask the Minister a simple question for more clarity: can a woman have a penis?

Bridget Phillipson: I tell you what: blokes should not beat up women. Maybe the hon. Member should have a word with his colleague.

James Asser (West Ham and Beckton) (Lab): The Minister will not be surprised to hear that I have had a lot of correspondence on this ruling, and there is great concern among the trans community about what the impact will be. There is also concern among the wider LGBT community that, in this populist age, the ruling may signal a move away from progress on LGBT rights. I therefore welcome her statement that there will be guidance. Will she ensure that that guidance is widely distributed, and is clear, so that it is understood? Will she also assure the LGBT community and the House that the Government and the Labour party stand four-square behind the advancement of LGBT rights, as they have long done, and that we will fight any attempt to row back on the progress of the last 30 years or the gains of the last Labour Government?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the advances made over many decades in ensuring that LGBT people are treated with dignity and have the support and ability to participate in public life; frankly, many years ago, for many people, that was simply not the case. We have made enormous progress in tackling prejudice and discrimination, and this Labour Government will always ensure that whatever someone's background, they will have every opportunity to take part in public life and achieve all that they are capable of. The Equality Act, which is one of the proudest achievements of the last Labour Government, enshrines in law the right to freedom from discrimination and harassment for women—and, yes, for trans people, too.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I thank the Minister for her answers and her statement? This ends years of confusion around sex-based protections. Being a woman is a matter of biology, not identity, and certainly not paperwork.

The judgment is welcomed by women, children and, I believe, many others. Does the Minister agree that it is not an eradication of rights for any person in this United Kingdom, but an underlining of protection? What discussions will take place with Cabinet colleagues to bring about an end to, for example, posters that use the terminology "birthing people", and to other such phrases being used in the NHS, and to instead ensure a return throughout UK health trusts to the court-declared

definition of a woman? Today is a good day for women, a great day for the law, and a wonderful day for people, and for truth.

Bridget Phillipson: I agree that the ruling of the Supreme Court was clear. That is important. It provides welcome clarity in a range of areas. On the issues that the hon. Gentleman identifies, such as access to healthcare treatment, it is for good reason that we make sure that there are sex-based services available for women, such as those who are breastfeeding, going through pregnancy and much more besides. Alongside that, we also need to make sure that healthcare is available and accessible to all.

Jonathan Hinder (Pendle and Clitheroe) (Lab): We have made so much progress as a society in breaking down sexist stereotyping. The stereotypes that said women had set roles and should look and act in a certain way were being broken down, exposed as the fake construct they really are. Sex is the only factor that distinguishes men from women. Beyond that, we should be able to live without conforming to those stereotypes. Then a movement came along that argued that all those feminine, girly things and those sexist stereotypes we had been fighting to break down were, in fact, the things that make a woman, and not sex. That is regressive, backward and nonsensical. Will the Minister join me in saluting those courageous women who stood up and pointed out the absurdity of that argument, and commit to rooting out that ideology from our public institutions?

Bridget Phillipson: Over many decades, feminist campaigners, from the '70s onwards, worked incredibly hard to ensure that women were able to divorce, that when that happened they were able to see their children, that they got protection at work, that they did not face discrimination, that they could access women's refuges and rape crisis centres, and that rape was finally, back in the early '90s, banned in marriage. I pay tribute to the amazing feminist campaigners and women over many decades who have brought us to a much stronger position, and to the brilliant trailblazers from across political parties who have ensured that we have far more women represented in this place than ever before.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): I want to thank the Minister for these remarks in her statement: "Dignity and respect for all—those are the values that lift us up and set us free. Those are the values that define and distinguish any modern and compassionate society." Will she just reiterate one more time that when this Government talk about increasing the support for equality for all, that really does mean all?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is right. This is about dignity and compassion for all, and that is an important message that I think we should all take out from this House.

Madam Deputy Speaker: For the final question, I call David Smith.

David Smith (North Northumberland) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her clear and positive response to the Supreme Court's ruling. Like her, before I was elected to this place, I ran a north-east-based homelessness charity for eight years. I have to say, contrary to what we have heard in some of the debate in the last few days and

even in this place today, it is almost always possible to find a solution that allows us to support people on a single-sex basis and those who identify as transgender. In the last eight years of running that charity, I was not helped by the total lack of clarity from the Conservative Government. Does the Minister agree that it is important to reaffirm that in the Equality Act, trans people remain protected from discrimination under the protected characteristic of gender reassignment, and that the Supreme Court ruling is focused on clarifying protections, based on the protected characteristic of sex, that have always existed in the Equality Act?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is right in his assessment, and I pay tribute to him for his work over many years to support homeless people, including young people, across the north-east. I agree that it has always been possible to ensure that single-sex spaces were delivered on the basis of biological sex under the Equality Act, but I am glad that providers can now be absolutely confident and crystal clear about that.

One additional observation is that the rights we are talking about were hard fought and hard won, and there was significant push-back over many periods. My hon. Friend will doubtless have had the same experience as I did: commissioners suggested that mixed-sex accommodation was appropriate when, in many cases, we were talking about vulnerable young women who had been exposed to sexual violence, including sexual abuse in the home, and what they wanted and needed was single-sex accommodation. It is important that we ensure that appropriate services are available for anyone who needs them. That means that, on occasion, trans people will also require separate provision, so that their needs—their healthcare needs, their support needs, and their needs in cases where they may face abuse and intimidation—can be properly met.

British Steel

6.56 pm

The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a statement on the steps the Government have taken since the Steel Industry (Special Measures) Act 2025 came into force.

The Government took the decision to recall Parliament on 12 April so that we could take swift, significant action on British Steel. As hon. Members will be aware, that was the first time Parliament had sat on a Saturday in over 40 years. Our attendance in this place was testament to the urgency and importance of the issue at hand, which was the need to prevent the immediate closure of the blast furnaces at Scunthorpe. The action we took on 12 April and the measures we have taken since matter greatly for this country, and are of enormous importance to thousands of steelworkers and their families. I am very pleased to inform the House that this afternoon, British Steel has cancelled the redundancy consultations started by Jingye. I know that many British Steel employees will breathe a sigh of relief at that news.

It is regrettable that when this Government took office, we inherited a steel sector in crisis, and an iconic British company facing an existential threat. Since day one, we have worked tirelessly with British Steel and the trade unions to find a resolution, because blast furnace closures at Scunthorpe is an outcome that this Government were simply not willing to allow. I want to stress that this kind of state intervention is not something that we intend to replicate in other situations, or for other industries. We recognised that unprecedented action was warranted in a truly unprecedented situation.

As hon. Members will know, the legislation we introduced, which was passed that weekend, gave us the power to direct British Steel's board and workforce, ensure they got paid, and order the raw materials to keep the blast furnaces running. It also permits the Government to do those things themselves, if the circumstances demand it. We have wasted no time in enacting those powers and taking the urgent action required to keep the blast furnaces lit at Scunthorpe. We have secured the raw materials needed to keep the blast furnaces operating, and we continue to work at pace to secure a steady pipeline of materials. Officials were on site to help British Steel within hours of the Steel Industry (Special Measures) Act 2025 becoming law, and we are already seeing the real-world impact of our decisive intervention.

I am delighted to say that British Steel has also confirmed today that it can keep operating both of the UK's last remaining blast furnaces. By contrast, Jingye's plan was to shut one of them down earlier this month. It will come as no surprise to hon. Members to hear that the company's workforce, their families, suppliers and communities have expressed deep gratitude for the action we have taken, which has preserved steelmaking at Scunthorpe and safeguarded thousands of skilled steel jobs.

Now that the immediate emergency has passed, it is right that hon. Members also ask questions about what is next. We have been clear that in order to secure the long-term future of British Steel, which has not been properly invested in for years, we will need a modernisation programme, ideally with a private sector partner. Furthermore, we will need to look beyond any individual

[Sarah Jones]

company, and ensure a secure and thriving future for the whole steel sector. That is why we are continuing our work to publish the steel strategy this spring.

All options are on the table as we begin to address the company's long-term sustainable future. My officials met Jingye on 16 April. It was a respectful conversation, and that dialogue will continue as we find a way forward in the national interest that safeguards steelmaking and protects jobs. With that in mind, I also want to say thank you—thank you to those who sent us messages to say we did the right thing to save British Steel, thank you to everyone who offered practical support and, most importantly, thank you to the workers and managers at British Steel who have heard our call to produce the steel that we need to deliver our plan for change, to keep the Scunthorpe site and everyone working at it safe, and to do so in a way that reduces the scale of financial losses. They have shown remarkable resilience and dedication at a supremely difficult time, and have served the plant, their community and the nation. They have promised us that there are better days ahead for British Steel, and we agree. We are giving them the chance they need to write the next chapter of British Steel's history.

We have assured this House time and again that steel has a bright future under this Government, and I restate that today. Steel is fundamental to Britain's industrial strength and to our identity as a global power, and we will never hesitate to protect it. We have committed to update both Houses as policy develops and a longer-term strategy is formulated. I reaffirm that written updates will be forthcoming regularly. So let there be no doubt: this week is not the end. It is not the end of the work, and it is not the end of the negotiations, but thanks to the actions we have taken, it is also not the end of British Steel. I commend this statement to the House.

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

7.1 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement, and I join her in thanking the Scunthorpe workers for their efforts over the last few weeks.

We are here once again because the Government had no plan—they failed to prepare, they bungled negotiations, and they took too long to listen to the warnings. What do we have to show for it? We have this botched nationalisation and a potential bill for the taxpayer stretching into the billions. I say billions, but it remains entirely unclear how much this bungled 11th-hour decision will cost, while the assets still belong to China. I hope that Members across the House will agree that this is a complete mockery of transparency and accountability, and I hope that the relevant Select Committees will take it upon themselves to conduct their own inquiries. Instead of a statement from the Treasury today, the Chancellor is running to the International Monetary Fund in Washington to explain how she broke the UK economy. Steel nationalisation, the IMF downgrading growth forecasts, trade union summits in No.10—it is all sounding a bit 1970s.

The simple problem is that we do not know the answers to any of these questions because the Government have failed to publish an impact assessment. Will the

Minister confirm to the House when they plan to do so? Has anyone in government asked the Office for National Statistics whether British Steel will now be classified as a publicly owned entity? Has the ministerial team discussed the impact of the takeover with the Chancellor on her already evaporated fiscal headroom? To date, how much has the Department spent, or how much has it committed to underwrite—that is a straightforward question that deserves an answer? Given that her Department had no budget for revenue support of steel, has the Minister been able to secure additional funds from the Treasury, so that other sectors or support for British exporters do not pay the price?

We have seen no further detail of the Government's proposed steel strategy, or any confirmation of longer-term plans to protect British steelmaking. Labour Members refused to back a coking coalmine to produce some of the raw materials that blast furnaces rely on. Instead, they wait for shipments to arrive from halfway around the world. Most importantly, the Government have not set out how they intend to reduce the enormous burden of sky-high energy costs. Instead, the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero seems dead set on delusional policies that drive energy prices in this country even higher. We cannot make steel sustainably when we have the highest energy prices in Europe. Prices for industrial energy in Birmingham in this country are four times higher than those in Birmingham Alabama. We cannot make steel if we do not have coal.

As Nissan's Alan Johnson said today, the "simple fact" is that the UK is

"too expensive... Once you've paid your electricity, gas, NICs we are too expensive—any industrial strategy that does not tackle that is a waste of time."

Well, we are here once again. There is no steel strategy, no industrial strategy, no export strategy and no energy strategy. Perhaps when she replies the Minister can share a single strategy that this Government actually possess.

Sarah Jones: It is getting harder and harder to understand quite what the Opposition's policy is on steel. It is all over the place. On the one hand, they ask us questions about costs. They say they had negotiated a modernisation plan with British Steel, but they will not tell us how much money they were willing to throw at that plan. Their proposal, apparently, was to build on two sites. If Jingye was asking us for £1.2 billion to build on one site, how much taxpayers' money were the Government putting on the table to fund two? We need answers to those questions.

On nationalisation, last week the shadow Secretary of State for Business and Trade, who was, as we know, Financial Secretary to the Treasury when Liz Truss crashed the economy, said that he backed full nationalisation of British Steel. On the other hand, this morning the Leader of the Opposition said on Radio 4 that nationalisation should be the "last resort." It seems a bit muddled. Finally, the hon. Member asked questions about the cost of energy pricing, forgetting of course that industrial energy prices doubled under the Tories. UK Steel, the trade body for the steel industry, is clear and has said that it is

"the UK's reliance on natural gas power generation"

that leaves us with higher prices than our international allies. It is not too much clean energy, but too little.

The hon. Member asked a reasonable question about the costs. I hope he will understand that matters at the moment are sensitive and commercially confidential, and I hope he will be assured that we will publish accounts in due course. We are securing materials and reviewing things such as health and safety, and other critical roles. Regular meetings are happening between the Departments and British Steel, as he would expect, and of course we will publish those details in due course. He asked about the coalmine. British Steel has told us directly that it could not use that coal because of the sulphur content. We also need coke ovens to turn coal into coke, and the coke ovens at British Steel were closed on his watch several years ago. The reality is that the Tories failed the British Steel sector, and this Labour Government are securing it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Chair of the Business and Trade Committee.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): I want to thank the Government for saving British Steel. Our Committee has been clear that it is essential for us to retain the ability to make primary steel in this country, and the steps that were taken a couple of Saturdays ago have helped derisk exactly that. The Government deserve credit for that. However, the Committee has written to the Government to say that a steel strategy needs to come forward as quickly as possible. It must be a clear, long-term vision for the industry, and there must be safeguards against the potential of a floodtide of steel from China. We need to use public procurement much more aggressively to support our local industry, energy costs need to come down, and we need a plan to keep scrap onshore. Will the Minister tell us when she plans to bring forward that steel strategy? Ultimately, what is good for the steel industry is good for Scunthorpe.

Sarah Jones: My right hon. Friend is of course right: the steel strategy is all the more important now than when we devised it in opposition and committed £2.5 billion for the steel strategy fund in our manifesto. We are looking at how we use that financial support, and, as he knows, at how we might do primary production. We are investigating future market opportunities and how we can increase demand here in the UK. He speaks of procurement, which of course is incredibly important. I have been talking to the procurement Minister and working on that, along with the Steel Council. We need to consider the availability of suitable sites for future investments.

Scrap is important, as my right hon. Friend says—how can we improve UK capability? Trade and overcapacity is a huge issue, and one that we share with our American colleagues, which is why we do not believe that the tariffs are necessary—we have the same problems and should try to solve them together. Carbon leakage, green steel, research and development, jobs and skills—we will develop a whole package of measures as quickly as we can. We will ensure that the plan, which we will publish in the spring, is one for the whole country and secures steel in the UK.

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

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement, and I associate myself with her gratitude towards Mr Speaker, hon. Members, parliamentary staff and, most importantly, the workers and managers of British Steel.

It is incredibly welcome news that both blast furnaces in Scunthorpe will continue to operate, allowing those who are employed at the site, the 35,000-plus families in this country who would have been affected by its closure, and Britain's national security, to breathe a momentary sigh of relief. Will the Minister join me in thanking the British Steel workforce for ensuring that the furnaces have not been allowed to go cold? It is good to see the Government taking action after the Conservatives spent far too long dithering over what to do.

The Minister has committed to delivering a steel strategy by the end of the spring, so the Government have five weeks left to produce it. Can she confirm that it will be published before 31 May, and that Parliament will have the opportunity to debate it? When we were here a few Saturdays ago, I asked the Secretary of State to confirm that the pension fund of employees and former employees is not in deficit, that all company contributions are up to date, and that assets of the scheme have not been transferred to the holding company or any offshore businesses. I am waiting for confirmation on that.

Finally, can the Minister guarantee that no redundancies will be made as a result of the action taken in the Steel Industry (Special Measures) Act 2025?

Sarah Jones: I thank the Lib Dem spokesperson for his support for our interventions and for his helpful questions. We will publish an impact assessment in due course, including classification considerations. He is right to point out that we did not answer his questions last time, and neither am I answering them this time, but I will ensure that I do. We have said that we will come back every four weeks with a statement, but I will write to him separately to ensure that he has the reassurance that he needs.

I cannot give the hon. Gentleman a date for the steel strategy, but I assure him that we are working as fast as we can. The issue is difficult because we are talking about spending £2.5 billion of public money. We have to ensure that we do that in the correct way. The roundtables that we have held, the advice from the Steel Council, and the work that we are having done by the Materials Processing Institute and Hatch to consider the economic issues that we need to grapple with, are really important—we must get that right. Of course, when we have a steel strategy, the House must have the opportunity to come and talk about it and be reassured that it is the right thing for the steel industry.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Last week, I met trade union representatives at Llanwern steelworks. I clearly understand and welcome the action taken at Scunthorpe, which stands in complete contrast with the Conservative party, which had no steel strategy in 14 years of government. Will the Minister be mindful of the promises made by Tata to invest in assets at Llanwern? We need that to be delivered. Plants like Llanwern should get their fair share of the green steel fund and procurement. What progress will we soon see on that?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of Tata investing in those assets and the future of the Port Talbot site, which is incredibly important. Of course, we meet regularly to talk about that. We have the transition board, which the Secretary of State for Wales convenes, along with the Welsh Government. We are working at pace to understand what those future investments could be. She is right to demand that the steel plan is for everywhere rather than just for one part or other of the UK. We want to and will ensure that the nations and regions all benefit from the funding and mechanisms that we put in place to improve procurement, scrap and all those things. Of course, it is not just Tata in Wales; Celsa too is incredibly important and a very impressive company. She can be reassured on that front. I am always happy to have more conversations with colleagues from Wales about how that can work going forward.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): It is clearly extremely welcome that the redundancy notices have been withdrawn—the steel community will breathe a sigh of relief. The Minister quite rightly speaks about what happens next. As well as a national steel strategy, the north Lincolnshire area needs a strategy of its own to maintain the local economy. Will she commit to an early meeting with MPs from the affected area, as well as with Councillor Rob Waltham, who leads North Lincolnshire council and has produced a document highlighting the way forward? That would be extremely helpful.

Sarah Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his continued support for his community. Yes, I am very happy to meet the leader of North Lincolnshire council, as I have done previously; he is an incredibly important part of the jigsaw of what happens in the area. I am always happy to meet MPs—I meet my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Sir Nicholas Dakin) and the hon. Gentleman regularly—and will continue to do so to ensure that we work in the interests of the whole area.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe (Sir Nicholas Dakin) on his tireless advocacy for the steelworkers and his Scunthorpe constituents—it should be recognised. How has the Government's decision to take control of British Steel been received by the workforce, customers and suppliers?

Sarah Jones: I agree with my hon. Friend's comments about the tireless work of our hon. Friend the Member for Scunthorpe on securing the future of British Steel. The Secretary of State went to the British Steel site in Scunthorpe just after the legislation was passed. I think it is fair to say that there was great relief after our intervention, but workers will also quite rightly be asking us, "What happens next and how will you secure the future of the site?" We are now completely focused on that.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Let me ask a question on behalf of my constituents who have sweated blood to keep the blast furnaces going. Unfortunately, as we know, electric arc technology cannot make virgin steel—only blast furnaces can do that. Are the Government 100% committed to maintaining our permanent ability to make virgin steel?

Sarah Jones: As the Secretary of State made clear during the debate of Saturday before last, the capacity for primary steelmaking production is important, and the steel strategy will look at exactly how we deliver that. There are new ways of delivering primary steel—using hydrogen, for example—that other European countries are now using and developing. We will ensure that, whatever the future brings, we have the right level of production in this country.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Government have my full-hearted support for the action they have taken with regard to Scunthorpe, which is important for not merely Scunthorpe itself and the workers there but the supply chain as well. In that regard, I want to raise an issue of concern that I hope my hon. Friend the Minister will look into. I have had a letter from Ian Walker, who is the chairman of Rotary Engineering, a long-established, highly regarded specialist engineering firm in my constituency. It provided services to British Steel last November, and it is still waiting for payment for those services, despite regular correspondence that has been ignored. If Rotary Engineering is having this difficulty with British Steel, many other small and medium-sized enterprises could as well. Will my hon. Friend look into this as a matter of urgency, find out what British Steel has been doing and try to ensure that these important companies—important for not merely British Steel but our whole engineering industry—are paid and able to survive?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. The supply chain of these big steel production companies, whether Tata, British Steel or others, is really important. I do not have an answer for him now, but I will look into the issue he raises about Rotary Engineering and ensure the right thing is being done.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): I thank the Minister for her statement and the good news about the saving of British Steel. She has not referred to the timetable for moving towards nationalisation, which we fully support and encourage the Government to push on with, so that they can accelerate towards the modernisation programme that she referred to. The new-found love of this House for blast furnaces should be encouraged, and we should be refurbishing and investing in them. That is the right thing to do to create a thriving steel industry to support British industry and our defence industry.

Sarah Jones: We know that Reform is a recent convert to steel—some of us have been supporting the industry for a long time—but the hon. Gentleman makes a fair point about what comes next. Our position remains that the best way forward is to try to find a commercial business to invest alongside Government, but we will do whatever it takes to secure the future of steelmaking and protect those jobs, for national security and for the supply chains. No options are off the table. I hope he will understand that although nationalisation is the most likely option, we would prefer a commercially run business. We are investigating all options. Nothing is off the table. We continue having many conversations, and as soon as we have an answer, we will come to this House.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): We need steel for wind turbines, for the equipment for carbon capture and for the expansion of grid infrastructure. In short, it is an essential part of how we expand our energy security in this country. The Prime Minister told the Liaison Committee that the grid connection date for Scunthorpe was 2034. Can my hon. Friend confirm that, as a crucial element of the modernisation agenda and securing the long-term future of Scunthorpe and steelmaking, which is so important to energy and every other part of our economy, she and her colleagues are looking at how that grid connection can be brought forward?

Sarah Jones: I thank the Chair of the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee for his important question. He makes the point that we need steel for green energy—wind turbines, carbon capture and so on—and our energy security. There is an important wider point, which is that since the election, £43.7 billion has been committed by the private sector to invest in clean energy in this country. Those on the Opposition Benches who are questioning net zero are putting at risk thousands of jobs that we will see delivered through clean energy. We have to be very careful what we wish for, because that investment is incredibly important for our country. The green energy sector is growing 10% faster than the rest of the economy. These are important things and important jobs.

My hon. Friend makes a really sensible point about grid connection. We have not just seen this at Scunthorpe; we have seen it with many different companies, where grid connections being 15 or even 20 years away makes investment completely unviable. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero announced last week how we are reforming the grid queue, getting rid of zombie projects and ensuring that we prioritise what is important. We will ensure we are doing everything we can to improve that connection at Scunthorpe.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): I take at face value what the Minister has said today about British Steel having a bright future. However, she did not mention any figures, other than a global figure of £2.5 billion floating around somewhere. Will she tell the House when she expects to publish the accounting officer assessment that is required when public money is committed? We can then test in the Public Accounts Committee whether those rules for spending public money are being adhered to, particularly in terms of feasibility.

Sarah Jones: The hon. Gentleman makes a really good point: we are spending public money, and we need to be incredibly careful in the way we do that. Of course, what we spend will be accounted for in the Department for Business and Trade annual accounts, as the insolvency costs were when we were in this position in 2019. We will update the House and bring forward whatever we can on those figures. He is right to raise that. I want to reassure him that the £2.5 billion is not floating around; it is a commitment in the Labour manifesto, and it is budgeted for. How we might spend that money is what we are trying to devise through the plan for steel, which will rightly have a lot of scrutiny from this House, the Public Accounts Committee and others.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): I wholeheartedly congratulate my hon. Friend on her sterling work and very much welcome her statement. No doubt she will remember that on 11 April, the Leader of the Opposition said that in government she had negotiated a steel modernisation plan. The next day, when the Government brought in emergency legislation to save Scunthorpe, she said she was still negotiating a deal when her boss called the snap general election. There was never any agreement for an electric arc furnace on Teesside, as she claimed, as much as me and my colleagues support the concept. Will the Minister confirm that it was the Conservative party that presided over the end of virgin steelmaking in Redcar and Port Talbot, and that it would have done the same at Scunthorpe were it not for the Labour Government? Will she also confirm that if the private sector will not sufficiently invest, the Government will maintain British Steel through public ownership and use their public procurement strategy to make the company sufficiently profitable?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend is completely correct. Indeed, the Leader of the Opposition confirmed on the “Today” programme this morning that the Conservative party policy is for an electric arc furnace at Scunthorpe or Scunthorpe and Teesside—it is unclear—which would have cost nearly twice as much as the existing proposals, without any mention of primary steelmaking. I understand that the official Opposition’s position is that they are not in favour of retaining primary steelmaking capacity in the UK.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): In her statement, the Minister celebrated the fact that this is not the end of British Steel, and we all welcome that, but Labour’s policies very well could be the end of domestic oil and gas, whether it is the extended windfall tax, removing investment allowances or no new oil and gas licences. We are walking towards the end of our domestic oil and gas sector, which has proven so beneficial to us across Scotland and the UK, all the while offshoring our emissions and relying on, at best, unreliable and, at worst, hostile states such as China to supply our renewable energy infrastructure. Taking the example of British Steel, is it not time to reverse Labour’s headlong rush towards ending oil and gas in the North sea and to rely on our domestic supply for as long as we can, to help our energy security into the future?

Sarah Jones: It would be helpful to understand the Opposition’s official position when it comes to China. China is the world’s second largest economy and our fourth largest trading partner. Hundreds of thousands of jobs in this country rely on our relationship and our trade with China. We on the Government Benches believe in free and open trade, and we will continue on that basis. The hon. Lady suggests that that is not the Conservative party’s official opinion; it would be useful to understand that.

Some 70,000 jobs have been lost in North sea oil and gas since the Conservatives were in power, because it is a declining basin and it is getting harder to drill for oil and gas—we know that. The transition is happening; the issue is how we support that. This Government are putting in place a huge amount of support to try to ensure that those very skilled workers can transition into the green energy sector. I repeat this statistic:

[Sarah Jones]

£43.7 billion of private sector investment in clean energy has been promised since this Government came to power. Is it really the Conservatives' opinion that we should throw away all that investment and not protect all those jobs for the future?

Mark Ferguson (Gateshead Central and Whickham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement and for her swift action. The people of Scunthorpe will be grateful, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy McDonald) noted, that stands in contrast to the way in which the people of Redcar and other areas were so cruelly abandoned by the last Government. The steel industry is not the production of steel alone; it also includes the supply chain. The Davy Roll Company, now Union Electric Steel, in my constituency, at the heart of Gateshead, performs a vital role as the last cast steel roll maker in the UK. The Minister has met representatives from the company, so will she update me on the work that she is doing to protect not only the steel industry where steel is made, but the wider supply chain?

Sarah Jones: I have met representatives from Union Electric Steel—everyone still calls it Davy Roll. The supply chain is incredibly important, and we are looking at it in our plan for steel. However, the investments made across Government more broadly over the years show that that supply chain, in whichever area of manufacturing it is found, has not been protected. The Ministry of Defence is keen to secure the supply chain in the UK for the investment that we are putting into defence, whether in aerospace, advanced manufacturing or space. We need to build supply chain capacity here in the UK because the world has changed and we have different priorities now, and my hon. Friend is right to raise that.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): There is consensus across this House that producing steel in the UK is completely necessary—that is undeniable. However, to produce steel we need coking coal. The US has given us a supply line for the next couple of weeks to keep our blast furnaces alive, and I know that the Minister is speaking to Australia and Sweden as well, but we need the ability to produce coking coal, so will the Minister please breathe fire into producing coking coal here in the UK?

Sarah Jones: I think the hon. Gentleman is referring to the situation at Whitehaven. As I have already said, British Steel told us directly that it could not use that coal because of the sulphur content and working coke ovens are needed to—

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): That is not true.

Sarah Jones: The hon. Gentleman says that is not true, but he needs to provide evidence of that, because that is what British Steel has told us, and it does not have coking ovens because they were closed under the previous Government.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): Madam Deputy Speaker, you know that I am a proud steel MP, so it has pained me to watch my business wither on the vine under

the last Government. I am incredibly grateful to the Minister for acting so decisively to save British Steel, but in the steel strategy, can she commit to look at the underlying problems affecting Liberty Steel, a speciality green steel producer, including high energy prices, business rates and other countries, particularly China, dumping their dirty, inefficient steel in our market?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend makes important points and that is exactly what we are looking at in the steel strategy. On dumping steel, having been requested to examine the issue by British Steel, the Trade Remedies Authority has agreed to look at steel safeguards and ensure that they are fit for purpose in the here and now. We are also looking at what happens beyond 2026, when the steel safeguards stop, to ensure that sufficient safeguards are in place. All the issues she mentions need to be looked at, including electricity prices and energy prices, which doubled under the last Conservative Government. As we have said before, 53% of global steel production comes from China. We need to look at that imbalance, at how we can ensure cheap steel does not come into this country and at how carbon leakage is working. We are working hard on all those issues.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): If the Government now believe that primary steelmaking capacity is critical for the security of the UK, do they also recognise that the skilled workers needed to produce that steel are equally as important? If so, why were they willing to let 2,800 of them be made unemployed last September in Port Talbot?

Sarah Jones: I hope the hon. Gentleman understands that the interventions that we made in this case were different for a number of reasons. When we were in Opposition, we worked with Tata to try to get it to change its plans, but we were unsuccessful. When we came into Government, we improved the deal that the previous Government had negotiated and we improved the redundancy offer. We got Tata to commit to invest in assets and free up land for other things, and we got it to provide a package of measures to improve that situation. The hon. Gentleman is right that that package meant the closure of the blast furnaces and the building of an electric arc furnace, with the closure happening before the electric arc furnace arrived, and because of the way that electric arc furnaces work, they are more efficient and need fewer people. We have been working really hard through the transformation board, led by the Secretary of State for Wales and the Welsh Government, to ensure that everybody has a significant package of support to try to ensure they transition to other jobs. That work is ongoing and progressing well, and we will continue to focus on it.

The two situations were fundamentally different. In Scunthorpe, British Steel was in the middle of a consultation on potential redundancies, and it failed to secure the materials to keep the blast furnaces going, which would have completely broken what British Steel should have been doing during that consultation. We could not allow that to happen, those blast furnaces to close and thousands of people to be suddenly made redundant, which is why we intervened in the way we did.

Chris McDonald (Stockton North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her statement and for her action on British Steel. I extend my thanks to the officials in her

Department, who I know have worked tirelessly in support of our Ministers to secure a future for the business. The Government's plan for change has changed the lives of steelworkers in Scunthorpe and Teesside. People I work with, and their families, will feel a sense of relief—I feel a sense of relief. Ultimately, it is the customers of British Steel who will pay the wages of those workers in the future. In one of the future updates that the Minister has promised, can we cover the product and market development for British Steel, and how British Steel can better penetrate the UK market and increase its market share for domestic production?

Sarah Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for his work and for the support that he has provided to me, officials and others because of his expertise in this space. He is right to thank staff; they have worked unbelievably hard, and I am very grateful for what they have done. He is also right to talk about how we ensure that the product market develops in the way that we want it to. We are looking at how we increase demand in the UK, as well as at procurement and other issues, so that we are not just trying to save our existing provision, but to expand our provision so that the steel industry can start to grow, instead of halving as it has done over the past 10 years under the Tories.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): Despite recent comments by a Scotland Office Minister, may I make it crystal clear that it is not “manufacturing grievance” to suggest that Grangemouth, like Scunthorpe, should be nationalised to protect a critical economic and security asset that has been run down by foreign owners? What we have seen from the UK Government in the last weeks, including today, is that when push comes to shove, they can take bold action in crisis, as they have done in Scunthorpe. Therefore, is it not the case that if the UK Government fail to act in a similar fashion at Grangemouth, highly skilled jobs will be lost, Scotland's only capacity to refine oil will be shut down and critical energy security will be further diminished?

Sarah Jones: We deeply regret the choices that INEOS has made. As the hon. Gentleman knows, Grangemouth does not provide the only refining capacity in the UK, but he is right to say it is the only provision in Scotland, which is why we intervened with a package of support and a £200 million commitment from the national wealth fund for what happens to the site. The hon. Gentleman is right to stand up for people in Grangemouth over the issues that they are facing, and we are doing all we can. As I said in my statement, the position in Scunthorpe was unique and particular, but that does not mean that we do not care just as much about the people in Grangemouth and that we will not ensure that we do everything that we can to pursue to the future development of that site in a way that supports jobs.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): I add my thanks to the Minister and her colleagues for their sterling work in recent weeks. It is true to say that Labour is saving steel. Some 68% of the steel this country needs is imported. That is a disgraceful legacy from the last Conservative Government, but it presents an opportunity for this Labour Government. Does the Minister agree that the next step we need to take is to mount robust trade protections, including bringing the carbon border adjustment mechanism forward to 2026

and making it mandatory for public procurement to use British steel, so that as we rebuild this country, we do it with British steel made by British workers?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend is right to say that we produce only about 30% of the steel we use in this country, and we must be much more ambitious about increasing that figure. He is also right to raise questions about carbon leakage and safeguards. The CBAM is being introduced in 2027. We are working through what happens in the interim period, how it works and how it interacts with the European CBAM—some changes are being made to what will be implemented. This work is obviously being led by the Treasury, but we are working really closely with the Treasury to ensure that the CBAM works in a way that protects the steel industry.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): On the day that Parliament was recalled, I gather that the workers themselves had to confront Chinese executives who were intent on coming on to the site. They believe that those executives intended to take unilateral action to shut down the blast furnace irrecoverably. Is that correct? What does that tell us about the motivation and behaviour of China when it gets its hands on our strategic industries?

Sarah Jones: I need to be clear on this point, because I know that there has been lots of speculation. We are not aware of any deliberate acts of sabotage. There was an issue with people coming on site who did not gain access. No Jingye officials are on site at the moment. We are talking to Jingye in a respectful way about what happens next. That said, it was the case that we had been negotiating in good faith, and we felt that that good faith had ended in the way in which Jingye was not securing the raw materials that we were really clear it needed to secure, so there was a breakdown there. The position on Jingye is a position about it as a company; it is not a position about our wider view of China. Because we have hundreds of thousands of jobs that are dependent on trade with China and because it is our fourth-largest trading partner, our position remains that we need to be mindful of that, but we also need to be mindful of security, and we always will be. There will always be a very specific and deliberate account of the security implications of any investors in the UK.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): We cannot make British steel without British ceramics. High temperature-resistant refractory ceramics are needed to line the blast furnaces to keep them alight, but the Minister is acutely aware that the ceramics sector in this country, much like the glass and chemicals sectors, is being crippled by energy prices, because of both wholesale costs and policy costs, which the last Government chose to put on and which were continued by this Government. When the Minister talks about backing British industry and manufacturing, can she say when glass, ceramics and other foundational industries will get the support they need to prop up and support the advanced manufacturing that we are all so proud of? The cost of that will be a tiny proportion of what has been committed to British Steel.

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend is quite right to raise ceramics and their importance in blast furnaces. We have all become steel experts through the many podcasts

[Sarah Jones]

that everybody has been listening to over recent weeks. One of the issues with shutting down blast furnaces immediately without proper provision is not just that the metal hardens, but that the ceramics crack and fracture. That was the risk with Jingye refusing to bring in those raw materials. My hon. Friend knows that the ceramics industry is very important to the Secretary of State and to myself, and the wider foundational industries are very important too. He is right to raise issues that we have talked about many times in terms of energy prices. The Government are working at pace to try to alleviate that problem and many others that he has raised, whether cheap imports or other issues.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Government have done the right thing, because steel is strategically important and the jobs are locally important. The Minister has asked what is next. I suspect that the House will come back to this issue, maybe very shortly, because over the last decade, we have seen energy-intensive industries flee the United Kingdom. Aluminium is gone, we have hardly any oil refineries, and we have one steel plant left. The reason for that is the mad net zero policy, which the Minister has tried to defend today. Decarbonisation has increased our energy costs, so that they are three times higher than in the US and eight times higher than in China. We do not have any local supplies of raw materials; we bring them halfway round the world. Carbon taxes add to the cost for businesses. Does the Minister accept that the economic reality is that we pour public money in at one end, and see it going down the net zero drain at the other?

Sarah Jones: I just do not agree with the right hon. Gentleman's position on this issue. He is right to say that we have seen the offshoring of manufacturing over a period of years. We have not entirely lost the aluminium sector—there is one smelter left, but that is all. Indeed, I meet representatives of the aluminium sector regularly, because it has had 25% tariffs put on it, just as the steel industry has. The trade body, UK Steel, was really clear that the UK's reliance on natural gas power generation leaves us with higher prices. The steel sector does not pay the green levies because of reductions that it is given. It is not net zero causing this problem; the challenge is how we get the clean energy that we need to stop our reliance on the overseas oil and gas market. He is right to say that we have seen offshoring, and we are working to stop that.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister, in contrast with the last speaker, agree that the future of this country is in clean power, safely produced from our own natural resources, such as floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea, and ultimately in our infrastructure being built out of green British steel, not steel imported from China?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We were talking earlier today about the importance of floating offshore wind in the Celtic sea, and the huge possibilities that brings the UK for energy security and good jobs.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Further to the answer that the Minister gave to my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), will she at least concede that it would be opportune to conduct an audit of our critical national industries, to ensure that if there are issues around foreign ownership, or ownership by malign state entities, we know where they are and have a plan to deal with them?

Sarah Jones: The right hon. Gentleman is right. We need an audit of our critical national industries, and we are doing that through our industrial strategy, so that, particularly in the eight growth-driving sectors that we have identified, we have policies to ensure that companies in the UK can continue to thrive. We believe in free and open trade, and we are not moving away from that; the Chancellor is making that case this week with our American colleagues. Security is incredibly important. The right hon. Gentleman will know that we are ensuring that where security is an issue, we take appropriate action, but that does not mean that we will stop trading with the second largest economy in the world.

Lola McEvoy (Darlington) (Lab): I put on record how proud I am to be sat on the Benches of the Government who are finally taking action to save the steel industry in this country. In my constituency, tens of thousands of people have steel engineering and manufacturing running through their blood. We are proud of that history, and we really want to contribute to a green, clean industrial future. When Ministers have big discussions about investment, and meet great businesses that want a place in which to invest, I ask them to consider Darlington and the Tees valley—a fruitful land full of people who know the value of hard graft.

Sarah Jones: Darlington and the Tees valley are excellent places in which to invest, so I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. In many parts of our country, steel is in the bones of our communities, but of course, this is not about looking back—it is about looking forward. In the future, we will need steel for not just clean energy, but for building the 1.5 million homes that we want to build, for Heathrow expansion and for our railways. We will need it across a whole range of sectors, and we know that demand is increasing, not reducing.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): The Minister talks about working at pace. If she wants to see what pace looks like, she might consider the Business and Trade Committee's report on steel, which was turned around in rapid time—much faster than the snail's pace review of steel, which has yet to emerge. Will it do so in the spring, or the summer? No one is quite sure. When that review finally emerges, will it address the elephant in the room, which is the ridiculous energy costs in this country? They have been driven up in part by gas, but also by carbon taxes, and by the renewable subsidies laid on by this Government.

Sarah Jones: The ridiculous energy costs that the hon. Gentleman refers to are a result of 14 years of Conservative Government—we need to be really clear about that. His point about the steel strategy, which has already been made, is reasonable. Of course, Members are really keen for us to bring that strategy forward as

soon as possible, but I repeat what I have said: we are looking at spending up to £2.5 billion, and there is absolutely no way that I, the Secretary of State, the Chancellor or the Prime Minister could come to this House and say, “Here is a steel strategy that we have written on the back of a fag packet after a couple of weeks thinking about it.” We need to do this right, and that is what we are doing.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Ann Davies.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Diolch yn fawr, Madam Dirprwy Lefarydd. I would like to follow up on a question from the hon. Member for Brycheiniog, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick), because unlike at Scunthorpe, jobs at Port Talbot are not being saved. The Government say that instead, they will retrain workers through the employment and skills flexible fund. Seven months later, can the Secretary of State say exactly how that money has been spent, and how many of the 2,800 laid-off steelworkers at Port Talbot have been retrained or re-employed?

Sarah Jones: I thank the hon. Lady for promoting me to Secretary of State—I am actually just a junior Minister. She is right to raise the issue of Port Talbot. The transition board has papers that we can send her, which set out exactly how many people have gone through training processes. The number of people who have taken compulsory redundancy is very small; I might be wrong—I am speculating slightly—but I think it is in the region of 190. Those people have had a package of support, and a lot of detail is available through the transition board about how that support will be provided. Of course, about 5,000 jobs will be secure in Port Talbot, but the hon. Lady is right to raise the issue; it is a

significant and important one that I would not want to downplay. The situation in Port Talbot was different, and we had to have a different response, but I am very happy to provide the information that she wants in more detail.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Jim Shannon to ask the final question from the Back Benches.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank the Minister for all her hard work, and I thank the Secretary of State, the Prime Minister and the Labour Government for their commitment to, and for saving, British Steel. There is no one in this great nation of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland who is not aware of that and does not welcome it, so well done.

I welcome the Minister’s statement, but can she confirm that developers and those in the construction sector in Northern Ireland, where steel is really important, will be able to secure steel as a certainty, and at a reasonable price? Can she confirm that they will not be tempted to outsource for fear that orders will not be fulfilled, because British steel will be accessible, viable, ready and available to those in Northern Ireland who wish to use it?

Sarah Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his words of appreciation. The construction sector is incredibly important when it comes to steel. We are looking at every measure we can take to ensure that people can buy British steel in a way that is competitive and useful for them. We are looking at procurement and at other measures to make the sector more competitive, but the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that British Steel provides huge amounts of steel for the construction sector, and we want that to continue.

Points of Order

7.55 pm

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Post Office Horizon scandal affected many innocent people, including a constituent of mine who has been waiting for a response to their claim under the group litigation orders scheme since August last year. I wrote to the Minister for services, small business and exports, the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), on 10 December last year about that delay. Despite chasing the Minister more than 10 times, and being assured repeatedly that an answer was on its way—in fact, the latest reply was that I was to expect an answer by Easter—I have still had no response to my letter, and my constituent is still waiting. They cannot understand why they have received no answer from this Government. How might we ensure an urgent response to my constituent on this very sensitive matter, and for those other Horizon victims who are also apparently experiencing delays with the scheme?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for giving notice of her point of order. I take it that she has notified the Minister that she intended to refer to him on the Floor on the House.

Victoria Atkins *indicated assent.*

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am not responsible for ministerial replies to Members' correspondence, but it is important that Members receive timely replies. I am sure that Members on the Treasury Bench will have noted the right hon. Member's remarks.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Can you please advise me on the correct response to late notice of a constituency visit by another Member? On 3 April, the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake)—who I have informed in advance of my intention to raise this point of order—wrote to me at 9.15 am to say that he was undertaking several visits across Birmingham that day, including to my constituency. I understand that he campaigned for the Conservative party in Northfield a short time later. The published rules of behaviour and courtesies of this House state that Members should notify colleagues whenever they intend to visit a colleague's constituency. It is clear from later correspondence that that intention predated the day itself.

Further, I draw attention to volume 718, column 353, of the *Official Report*, dated 13 July 2022. The Deputy Speaker in the Chair on that occasion stated that

“receiving notice on the day of a visit does not reflect the intention of the guidance...I would expect all Members to make efforts to respect not just the letter of the guidance but its spirit, and to give notice at least in advance of the day of the visit itself.”—[*Official Report*, 13 July 2022; Vol. 718, c. 353.]

Can you please advise me on whether that expectation still stands, and if it does, what steps we can take to ensure that members of the shadow Cabinet extend that courtesy, including to other Birmingham MPs?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order. I understand that he has notified the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) that he intended to raise this matter in the Chamber. I remind all hon. Members that they must inform colleagues in advance whenever they intend to visit another colleague's constituency, except for purely private purposes, and that as a matter of courtesy, that notice should not be left until the last minute.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On Thursday 10 April, the Home Secretary visited my constituency with the Prime Minister. While the Prime Minister had the courtesy to inform me three hours ahead of his visit, the Home Secretary did not. This was not an isolated incident; last month, I raised a point of order regarding the Environment Secretary and the farming Minister, the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), not informing me of their visit. Several hours after that visit, the Home Secretary's team contacted me to say that they were informing me in accordance with paragraph 10.10 of the “Ministerial Code”. Paragraph 10.10 clearly states that a Minister

“must inform in advance, and in good time, the MPs whose constituencies are to be included within the itinerary.”

The Home Secretary's notification was neither in advance nor in good time. Could you please advise me whether, in this instance, the Home Secretary has broken the ministerial code?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order. I understand that he has notified the Home Secretary that he intended to raise this matter in the Chamber. Again, I remind all hon. Members that they must inform colleagues in advance whenever they intend to visit another colleague's constituency, except for purely private purposes, and that as a matter of courtesy, that notice should not be left until the last minute.

Littering from Vehicles (Offences)

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

7.59 pm

Claire Hughes (Bangor Aberconwy) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to increase penalties for civil offences relating to littering from vehicles; to make provision about the use of technology in detecting and identifying persons who have committed such offences; and for connected purposes.

I start by thanking the Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner), for being here today. When I was first elected last year, I did not expect that litter would be one of the first issues I would be campaigning on in Parliament, but over the past nine months it is something that constituents have raised with me again and again, because frankly, they are fed up. Roadside littering has become more than just an eyesore. For many, it is a visible sign of a lack of respect for our environment, for our communities and for each other. Right now, too many people seem to think it acceptable to buy a takeaway from a drive-through, to eat it, drink it on the go, and then throw the rubbish out the window.

Research backs that up. The road safety charity IAM RoadSmart found in February this year that nearly 40% of motorcyclists had experienced car drivers or passengers throwing litter out their window while overtaking. National Highways found that 65% of drivers who admit to littering have thrown food and drink packaging from their vehicle. Keep Wales Tidy reported that fast-food litter hit its highest-ever levels in its latest annual report in 2023.

It appears that while some people care a lot about keeping their cars clean, they are not nearly as bothered about keeping our communities clean. Scientific litter mapping carried out on road networks in and around Cardiff showed that litter was dropped every three seconds. That is the equivalent of 28,800 pieces of litter every day in just one city. When roadsides are already strewn with litter, it signals that littering is acceptable and it encourages more of the same. In rural and coastal areas, such as those I represent in north Wales, roadside litter adds to the growing sense that tourism, while vital to our local economy, places a disproportionate burden on local residents and the authorities tasked with cleaning up.

To be clear, littering is already a criminal offence in England and Wales under the provisions of the Environmental Protection Act 1990. Local authorities can issue fixed penalty notices in lieu of prosecution of up to £500 in England and £150 in Wales. In England, if someone is caught throwing litter from a vehicle, litter authorities can also issue a civil penalty, even if they cannot establish the identity of the person who threw the litter. It is evident, though, that the current penalties are not acting as a sufficient deterrent. We only need to look out of our car window the next time we slow down near a roundabout or traffic lights to see the evidence.

Litter is not just ugly; it puts those tasked with clearing it up at risk, and it costs UK taxpayers a massive £1 billion a year to clear it up. Many of us would agree that money could be better spent elsewhere, including on our NHS. Litter also has serious social

and environmental consequences. It is estimated that 3 million animals die due to litter in the UK every year. Discarded food attracts wildlife such as deer and foxes to the side of the road, where they are more likely to be hit by cars. Small mammals get trapped in bottles and die. The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals receives about 10 calls a day about animals injured or killed by waste, and it believes the actual number to be far higher. We are said to be a nation of animal lovers, but the figures suggest otherwise.

Litter from vehicles makes its way to the sea. A staggering 350 kg of litter was collected in just one day by North Wales Wildlife Trust volunteers during their annual beach clean-up in January. Not all of that will have been thrown from vehicles, of course, but a significant proportion of that which gets thrown from cars ends up getting blown into watercourses and ends up in our rivers and streams. Microplastics are another huge concern as litter degrades in the environment. Bangor University conducted some of the world's first-ever research looking at microplastics in the UK's rivers and lakes and even found them in a remote lake near the summit of Yr Wyddfa.

I am therefore pleased that both the UK and Welsh Governments are taking action to tackle this kind of pollution, including by restricting single-use plastics and introducing deposit return schemes. To truly get a grip of this problem, we need a multi-pronged approach, and tackling roadside littering has to be part of that. Some people might say that a lack of litter bins is to blame, and I do not disagree that more bins would help. The Road Haulage Association, which I have met, is calling for better facilities for long-distance lorry drivers, and I fully support that ask. However, a lack of bins does not make it okay for anyone to throw cans, food packaging or empty bottles on our roads knowing that somebody else will have to pick it up.

I am sure that every Member of this House would join me in thanking the army of volunteers up and down the country who dedicate their time and energy to litter-picking week in, week out. In my constituency, groups such as the Friends of Mostyn Street in Llandudno, Trash Free Trails and Keep Bangor Tidy—to name just a few—remove huge quantities from our communities. We owe them all a huge debt of thanks, but we cannot keep expecting volunteers to clear up after the minority of people who have refused to act responsibly.

One of the central missions of this Government is to take back our streets, tackling crime and restoring a sense of order. I strongly welcome the measures being introduced in the Crime and Policing Bill to crack down on antisocial behaviour and to stop turning a blind eye to what the last Government deemed “low-level crimes”. In a similar vein, this Bill proposes increased civil penalties for littering from vehicles, because I strongly believe that we need stronger deterrents. The Bill also allows for an expansion in the use of technology for the identification of offenders, which is currently a barrier to enforcement and further weakens the deterrent powers of fixed penalty notices. We need to ensure that the law keeps pace with advances in technology, which will not only increase the detection rate, but reduce the costs of enforcement.

To conclude, this Labour Government are relentlessly focused on the priorities of working people in our country, and 81% of people in the UK say that litter

[Claire Hughes]

makes them feel angry and frustrated. There are many pressing issues in the Government's in-tray inherited from the last 14 years, but tackling roadside littering will help restore pride in our communities, protect biodiversity and support nature restoration. I hope that the House will support this Bill. I thank the House for giving its time and attention to this important matter.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Claire Hughes, Mr Alex Barros-Curtis, Andrew Ranger, Ann Davies, Becky Gittins, Catherine Fookes, Kanishka Narayan, Llinos Medi and Sarah Coombes present the Bill.

Claire Hughes accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 May, and to be printed (Bill 222).

Sentencing Guidelines (Pre-sentence Reports) Bill

Second Reading

8.8 pm

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Shabana Mahmood): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

When I spoke in this House on 1 April, I set out the Government's intention to introduce emergency legislation, because I believe that our justice system must be above all else fair, and that, standing before a judge, we are all equal, no matter the colour of our skin or the question of our faith. Given the existential nature of this matter for our justice system, I was clear that we would move at pace to change the law. The Sentencing Guidelines (Pre-sentence Reports) Bill was introduced that same day. With Second Reading taking place just three weeks later, we are forging ahead with plans to legislate as quickly as possible.

Before I set out the contents of the Bill, it bears repeating how we came to be in the current situation and why expedited legislation is necessary. In the last Parliament, the Sentencing Council put forward revised guidelines on the imposition of community and custodial sentences. I should note that during a statutory consultation they were welcomed by the last Conservative Government in no uncertain terms. The shadow Transport Secretary, the hon. Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), who was a Justice Minister at the time, should be able to furnish his colleagues with the details, but as he is absent today, I will do so.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Can the right hon. Lady clarify whether the guidelines proposed under the previous Government were the same as those with which she is dealing now, or did they differ—and if they differed, how did they differ?

Shabana Mahmood: They did not differ in any substantial way. All the guidelines, in so far as they concern issues relating to race, religion, culture or belief, are exactly the same as those to which the Justice Minister responded under the Conservative Administration. Hiding behind that, I am afraid, shows a failure to reckon with the Opposition's own track record, which has become quite a hallmark of theirs in recent weeks and months.

These guidelines help judges, when sentencing an offender, to determine whether to impose a community order or a custodial sentence, providing guidance on the thresholds for disposals of this type. In the process of deciding which threshold has been met, judges are required by law to obtain a pre-sentence report, except in circumstances where they consider such a report to be unnecessary. The reports are used to give the courts more context of the offending behaviour in a given case, and set out any factors that should be considered as part of the sentencing process. As I said to the House on 1 April, generally speaking I am in favour of the use of pre-sentence reports, and in fact I have recently freed up capacity in the Probation Service precisely so that it has more time to produce reports of this type.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): The chairman of the Sentencing Council has argued that the sentence should be tailored to the

offender, but my constituents—and, I suspect, those of the Secretary of State—think that the sentence should be tailored to the offence and its effect on the victim. That is what counts, not the background, circumstances, history or origins of the offender.

Shabana Mahmood: The purpose of the pre-sentence reports, used properly, is to provide the court with the full context of the offending behaviour. That enables the court to ensure that when it imposes a custodial sentence it will be successful and capable of being delivered in respect of that offender, or else a community sentence should be imposed instead. It is a useful mechanism that judges have at their disposal. We would expect it to be used in all cases except when the courts consider it unnecessary because they have all the information. Because I consider pre-sentence reports to be so important in giving the courts all the information that they need to pass the right sentence for the offender who is before them, I have specifically freed up capacity in the Probation Service so that it can do more work of this type. However, the updated guidelines specifically encourage judges to request them for some offenders and not others, stipulating circumstances in which a pre-sentence report would “normally be considered necessary”. That is the bit that I am seeking to change.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The right hon. Lady has just said something very important: namely, that she would normally expect a pre-sentence report to be given in all, or at least almost all, cases. I hope that is her position, because what seems unfair to me is that a pre-sentence report, which presumably enables people to present arguments in mitigation, should be available to some people who have been convicted of a crime but not to others. Surely it should be available either to everyone or to no one, because everyone's individual circumstances deserve the same degree of consideration.

Shabana Mahmood: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. In fact, we fully support section 30 of the Sentencing Act 2020—the sentencing code—which makes it clear that a court must obtain a pre-sentence report unless it considers it unnecessary to do so. That would be in cases where judges consider that they already have at their disposal the facts that will enable them to make a determination of the correct sentence for any particular offender. I think that the Sentencing Council got things right in the paragraph of the current guidelines that comes before the one that is the subject of the debate and the Bill, which states:

“PSRs are necessary in all cases that would benefit from an assessment of one or more of the following: the offender's dangerousness and risk of harm, the nature and causes of the offender's behaviour, the offender's personal circumstances and any factors that may be helpful to the court in considering the offender's suitability for different sentences or requirements.”

That covers all the areas in which we would normally consider PSRs to be necessary, and I would like them to be used more extensively. Indeed, I would like them to be the norm in all cases, because I think they offer important information to people who are passing sentence—unless, of course, it is unnecessary because judges have already been furnished with all the details, having heard the whole of the case that has been taking place before them.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): The Lord Chancellor has just given us, very helpfully, the list of matters that might be relevantly considered in a pre-sentence report. As she has said, however, one of the items on that list is “personal circumstances”, and that is what the Bill will remove from the Sentencing Council's discretion. May I ask her why she has not used in the Bill the language that is included in the explanatory notes? Paragraph 8 states that the Bill will

“prevent differential treatment... It does this by preventing the creation of a presumption regarding whether a pre-sentence report should be obtained based on an offender's membership of a particular demographic cohort”.

That strikes me as a much narrower exclusion, and perhaps one better targeted at the problem that the Lord Chancellor has, in my view, rightly identified.

Shabana Mahmood: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is right. That is why we have offered the additional context in the explanatory notes. Personal characteristics and personal circumstances have, over the years, been elided in different court judgments, and the different definitions of the two have sometimes slipped. I wanted to make it clear in the Bill that we are constraining the Sentencing Council's ability to create guidance for PSRs in relation to personal characteristics. We refer in the Bill to race, religion, culture and belief, specifically to ensure that the Sentencing Council understands that we are targeting this part of the offending section of the imposition guideline. It will then have its own interpretation of how personal circumstances and personal characteristics should apply. I would expect this to be analogous to protected characteristics in the Equality Act 2010, in terms of the way in which the courts are likely to approach the question of what a personal characteristic is for the purpose of the Bill.

However, I wanted to make the intention behind the Bill very clear to the Sentencing Council, and to everyone else. It is tightly focused on the offending section of the imposition guideline and leaves the wider question of personal circumstances untouched. As I will explain later in my speech, there is helpful Court of Appeal guidance on circumstances and on other occasions on which a PSR should normally be required, and nothing in the Bill will affect the Court of Appeal precedents that have already been set.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): Is the Lord Chancellor aware that the Sentencing Council guidelines, and indeed the Bill, turn on issues that some of us have campaigned on for decades? I think that there would be concern if the Bill undermined the independence of the judiciary.

Shabana Mahmood: It certainly does not undermine the independence of the judiciary. There is a long tradition of campaigners, including my right hon. Friend, who have a lengthy track record of campaigning on issues relating to disparities within the criminal justice system and, indeed, across wider society. In so far as those disparities relate to the criminal justice system, my strong view is that they are matters of policy.

Parliament is the proper place for that policy to be debated, and Parliament is the proper place for us to agree on what is the best mechanism to deal with those problems. It is not within the purview of the Sentencing

[*Shabana Mahmood*]

Council, because this is a matter of policy. Judges apply the laws that are passed by this House; that is their correct and proper function. I will always uphold their independence in that regard and will never interfere with it, but this turns on a matter of policy. It is right for the Government of the day to seek a policy response to this issue, and it is right for it to be debated and, ultimately, legislated for in the House.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Lord Chancellor for opening the debate, and for her answers to the questions so far. I think every one of us believes that the foundational principle that justice is blind must be adhered to in every way, but we live in an age of ever-changing political correctness, which, regardless of whether we like it or not, invades Parliament and our lives.

I am very much in favour of what the Lord Chancellor has said about race and faith. As a person of faith, I want to make sure that race and faith can never be mitigating or aggravating factors when it comes to justice. Given the lives that we live, the world that we live in, and all the things that impact on us daily and in this House as MPs, can the Lord Chancellor confirm that faith, justice and religion will always be preserved in the way that they should be?

Shabana Mahmood: For me, one of the most moving parts of the parliamentary day is when the day starts with prayers. Those are Christian prayers, and I am of the Muslim faith, but I always find it moving to be part of them and to hear them. They remind us that we all belong to a country with a long heritage, which is steeped in faith. The source code for much of the law of England and Wales is the Bible. The hon. Gentleman makes some broader points on the issue of faith and how important it is, and I suspect that he and I have a lot in common in that regard. There must never be differential treatment before the law of our land, and before any court, on the basis of faith.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): I welcome the Lord Chancellor's point about parliamentary sovereignty and that fact that policy must be determined by this place. I think many Members from across the House will have been quite shocked by the response of the Sentencing Council to her letter when she asked it to consider the guidelines again. Does she agree that if this place continues to butt heads with the Sentencing Council over guidelines like these, maybe the best thing to do is abolish the Sentencing Council?

Shabana Mahmood: I have had constructive conversations with the Sentencing Council, and I have made it very clear that I do not really do personal. I certainly would not do it in relation to the judiciary, whose independence I uphold and whose security I am ultimately responsible for. I take those responsibilities very seriously. I swore an oath on my holy book, and that means a huge amount to me. There is a clear difference here about where the line is drawn between matters of policy and matters that are correctly within the purview of the judiciary, which is how the law should be applied in the cases that they hear. I am simply making it very clear that this is policy and is for this place to determine, but

as I will come to later in my speech, this situation has highlighted that there is potentially a democratic deficit here. That is why I am reviewing the wider roles and powers of the Sentencing Council, and will legislate in upcoming legislation if necessary. I will now make more progress with my speech and give way to other colleagues later if people wish to intervene again.

The updated guidelines specifically encouraged judges to request pre-sentence reports for some offenders and not for others, stipulating the circumstances in which a pre-sentence report would “normally be considered necessary”. This included cases involving offenders from ethnic, cultural or faith minorities. In other words, a pre-sentence report would normally be considered necessary for a black offender or a Muslim one, but not necessarily if an offender is Christian or white, and we must be clear about what that means. By singling out one group over another, all may be equal but some are more equal than others. We must also be honest about the impact that this could have. Equipped with more information about one offender than another, the court may be less likely to send that offender to prison. I therefore consider the guidance to be a clear example of differential treatment. As such, it risks undermining public confidence in a justice system that is built on the idea of equality before the law.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): Given that the Sentencing Council refused the Lord Chancellor's first invitation to rewrite its guidance, is she confident that the limited nature of this Bill is sufficient? Would she not be wiser to take a broader power to ensure that in future all sentencing guidance has an affirmative vote in this place?

Shabana Mahmood: It is right that, moving at pace, I have sought to have a targeted Bill that deals with this particular imposition guideline. I have made it very clear that I am conducting a wider review of the role and powers of the Sentencing Council. If we need to legislate further—maybe in the way that the hon. Gentleman suggests, although other mechanisms are also potentially available—I will do so. I am not ruling out further legislation—in fact, it is very much on the table—but it is right that we are moving quickly in order to deal with the problems that could be caused by the guidelines coming into force, and that I have taken targeted action in this short but focused Bill.

As I told the House a few weeks ago, I had several discussions with the Sentencing Council in the time leading up to 1 April, when the updated guidelines were due to come into force. I reiterate my gratitude to the council's chair, Lord Justice William Davis, for engaging with me on this issue and for ultimately making the right call by pausing the guidelines while Parliament has its say. I should say again that I have no doubt whatsoever about the noble intentions behind the proposed changes, because I understand the problem that the Sentencing Council was attempting to address. Racial inequalities exist in our justice system and are evident in the sentencing disparities between offenders from different backgrounds, but as the Sentencing Council acknowledges, the reasons for this are unclear. Addressing inequalities in the justice system is something that this Government take very seriously, and we are determined to increase

confidence in its outcomes, which is why we are working with the judiciary to make the system more representative of the public it serves.

I have also commissioned a review of the data that my Department holds on disparities in the justice system in order to better understand the drivers of the problem, but although I agree with the Sentencing Council's diagnosis, I believe it has prescribed the wrong cure. Going ahead with the new guidelines would have been an extraordinary step to take. It would have been extraordinary because of what it puts at risk: the very foundations of our justice system, which was built on equality before the law. The unintended consequences would have been considerable, because the idea that we improve things for people in this country who look like me by telling the public that we will be given favourable treatment is not just wrong, but dangerous. We are all safer in this country when everyone knows we are treated the same. If we sacrifice that, even in pursuit of a noble ideal such as equality, we risk bringing the whole edifice crashing to the ground.

I know there are disagreements in this House with regard to the correct policy to pursue, not least between the shadow Secretary of State for Justice, who opposes the guidelines, and the shadow Transport Secretary, whose support for them I have noted already—though I suppose that does assume that the shadow Secretary of State for Justice really is who he shows himself to be today. I must admit that I have begun to question whether his principles are set or really of no fixed abode. After all, he did pose as a Cameroon centrist for so many years, and only recently became his party's populist flag bearer. It is enough to make me wonder whether he is, in fact, a Marxist—but one of the Groucho variety. “These are my principles,” he says, and if you do not like them, he has others.

Regardless of our positions on this question of policy, one thing is clear: this is a question of policy. How the state addresses an issue that is systemic, complex and of unclear origin is a question of what the law should be, not how the law should be applied. Let me be clear about that distinction: Parliament sets the laws and the judiciary determine how they are applied, and they must be defended as they do so. I will always defend judicial independence, and as I said earlier, I swore an oath to do so when I became the Lord Chancellor. Given the shadow Lord Chancellor's recent diatribes, including just hours ago in this place, he may want to acquaint himself with that oath, if he intends ever succeeding me in this position, although I am assuming that it is my job he wants, not that of the Leader of the Opposition.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): I think the Lord Chancellor just said that the approach to the guidelines taken by the Sentencing Council puts the foundation of the justice system at risk. Given that, how can she have confidence in a Sentencing Council that takes such an approach?

Shabana Mahmood: I have engaged constructively with the Sentencing Council and will continue to do so, and I am in the process of legislating to prevent this imposition guideline from ever coming into force. It has currently been paused, and I think that was the right step for the Sentencing Council to take. I am conducting

a wider review of the roles and powers of the Sentencing Council, and it is right that I take a bit more time to think carefully about that, about what we may or may not want it to do, and about how we may right the democratic deficit that has been uncovered. I think my approach to the Sentencing Council is very clear from the action I am taking.

Sir Julian Lewis: I do not think anyone is questioning the firm action the Lord Chancellor is taking. The point my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild) made is: why should it be necessary for her to take that action? Surely, if the Sentencing Council cannot see the distinction she makes between its proper role and Parliament's proper role, it is not fit to do the job.

Shabana Mahmood: The Sentencing Council might argue, rightly, that given the guideline was welcomed by the former Government, it probably thought it was on safer ground than I consider it to be. However, there is clearly a confusion, a change in practice, or a development in ways I disagree with about the proper line between what is practice or the application of the law and what is properly in the realm of policy. That is what I am absolutely not going to give any ground on and that I will be setting right.

Sir John Hayes: The right hon. Lady is right about the moving process or trend that she has described, but the trouble is that it is part of a bigger problem, is it not? It is the problem of judicial activism, and it is not new. For some time, judicial activists have sought to do exactly what she has said, and it is they, not people in this House, who endanger the separation of powers.

Shabana Mahmood: However, it is always up to the people in this House, if they feel that a law is being applied in ways that were not intended, to put that law right. I am afraid the right hon. Member's comment is a rather damning indictment of 14 years of Conservative Government, with 14 years of sitting back and allowing other people to do the policy work that Ministers in the previous Government perhaps did not have the time or inclination to do themselves.

I do not think that judges, in applying the law, are doing anything wrong; they are doing their job. They are public servants, and they do their job independently. It is right that we have an independent judiciary in this country. We are very lucky to have a judiciary that is world class and highly regarded. One of the reasons why so many businesses from all over the world want to do business in this country is that they know they can trust our courts system and the independence of our judges. I think it is incumbent on the whole of this House to defend the independence of the judiciary, because that independence was hard won. It is one of our absolute USPs as a rule of law jurisdiction in this country, and none of us must ever do anything that puts it at risk.

If there are issues about the way in which the law is applied—if Parliament or Ministers ever consider that it has strayed too far from the original intention—we can always legislate, and I am doing just that today. I hope this is an example that others, if they have issues in their areas, may consider taking as well. It is a question

[Shabana Mahmood]

of policy, and that should be decided and debated here in this place, in this House, and the public must be able to hold us to account for the decisions we take, rewarding or punishing us at the ballot box as they see fit. This is the domain of government, politics and Parliament, and today we reassert our ability to determine this country's policy on the issue of equality of treatment before the law.

Dr Caroline Johnson: The right hon. Lady is making a point about the wider justice system and the importance of equality before the law. What has she done to assure herself and the House that, in all aspects of her Department's work, people are being treated equally under the law—whether in relation to parole, how they are treated in prison, bail conditions and so on?

Shabana Mahmood: I have ordered a wider review of all guidance across all the MOJ's work in so far as it relates to equality before the law to make sure that the problems we have uncovered here are not replicated elsewhere. There is the issue of bail guidance, which was discussed in the House earlier. I have already ordered a review, and that guidance is being redrafted as we speak. That particular guidance has been something like 20 years in the making—it has been added to over many years—so the redraft has to be careful and we must make sure it does not have any unintended consequences. However, we are cracking on with that work at pace, and I will make sure that, by the time I am done, we can all be absolutely clear that this sweep towards allowing potential differential treatment is sorted out once and for all.

Dr Johnson *rose*—

Shabana Mahmood: If the hon. Lady will forgive me, I will make more progress. I think I have been more than generous.

That brings me to the Bill before us today. While the updated Sentencing Council guidelines are currently paused, if we do not act they will come into force—[*Interruption.*] Well, there was a lot to say, gentlemen, about the previous Government's track record and it needed to be said. And I do not think the hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood) should mind me taking interventions from people on his own side. That is a novel approach for the shadow Front Bench.

Let me turn to the specifics of the Bill. It is tightly focused, containing just two clauses. Clause 1 amends section 120 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009, which brought the Sentencing Council into existence. It dictates that the guidelines the council produces may not include references to personal characteristics, including race, religion or belief, or cultural background. Clause 2 relates to how the Bill will be enacted: that it will apply only to England and Wales, and that its measures will come into force on the day after it passes.

It is also important to be clear about what the Bill does not do. It does not stop the Sentencing Council from issuing broader guidance concerning requests for pre-sentence reports in those cases where it is helpful for the court to understand more about an offender's history and personal circumstances. The Bill does not interfere

with the courts' duties to obtain a pre-sentence report in appropriate cases, for example those involving primary carers and victims of domestic abuse. And, as detailed in the Bill's explanatory notes, it does not change existing precedent where the courts have determined that pre-sentence reports are necessary or desirable, in cases such as: Thompson, where the Court of Appeal recently emphasised their importance in sentencing pregnant women or women who have recently given birth; Meanley, in which the court referenced the value of pre-sentence reports for young defendants; or Kurmekaj, where the defendant had a traumatic upbringing, vulnerability, and was a victim of modern slavery. Instead, the Bill narrowly focuses on the issue at hand, putting beyond doubt a principle which finds its ancient origins in Magna Carta and has developed over the centuries to serve the interests of justice not just here but in jurisdictions around the world: that each of us, no matter who we are, where we come from or what we believe, stand equal before the law of the land.

Wider questions remain about the role and the powers of the Sentencing Council, as I have noted. The council does important work, bringing consistency to judicial decision making, but it is clear in this instance that it went beyond its original remit. It sought to set policy, which stood out of step with the Government of the day. Therefore, it raises the question: who should set sentencing policy? Today's legislation only addresses this question in the narrowest terms, considering the guidance on pre-sentence reports. It does not give us a definitive resolution as to whether it is Government Ministers or members of the Sentencing Council who should decide policy in the future. As I noted, that leaves us with a democratic deficit.

As I told the House on 1 April, the question of the role and powers of the Sentencing Council must therefore be considered further. That work is already under way in my Department. Should a further change be required, the Government will include it in upcoming legislation. The Sentencing Council plays an important role in our justice system, and any changes to it must be made carefully and with the consideration it deserves. I am sure they will be discussed more in this House in the months ahead, and I welcome the opportunity to debate them.

The Bill we are debating today is small, but the issues it contains could not be of greater significance. I know the majority of right hon. and hon. Members in this House would agree that the Sentencing Council's intentions on this issue were noble, but in trying to reach for equality of outcome, they sacrificed too much, undermining the sacred principle of equality before the law. It is right that we, as policymakers, stop the updated guidelines from coming into force. We must stand up for the idea that no matter our race or religion, no person should receive preferential treatment as they stand in the dock before a judge, so I beg to move that the Bill now be read a second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Lord Chancellor.

8.38 pm

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): How did we get here? It takes a special kind of uselessness to engineer a crisis entirely of your own making and then to come to

this House asking for applause as you legislate your way out of it. Let us remind ourselves what actually happened here. The Sentencing Council, an unelected unaccountable quango created by the Labour party, issued guidance that would have divided our criminal justice system by race, religion and identity; a two-tier system as offensive to common sense as it was to the most basic and important principle of equality before the law.

The Justice Secretary, asleep at the wheel, either did not know or did not care. Her officials signed off the guidance, her Ministry nodded it through, and the council published it; the guidance was due to come into force. Only then, after I raised this issue with her in this House, and in the face of fierce opposition from the Conservatives, the press and the public, did she rouse herself from her stupor—only then did she discover her principles.

Even at that point, however, the Justice Secretary did not act decisively. She did not use her powers to sack the architects of this shameful guidance, support my legislation or bring forward immediate legislation of her own to stop it. What did she do instead? She wrote a letter begging the council to reconsider. Such is the pace at which she moves—or, rather, crawls—that it took a further seven days to put her thoughts in writing after a meeting.

When the council did not move, the Justice Secretary threatened action—only to be humiliated by the chair of the council, who made clear that if she tried, he would take legal action and potentially challenge his own Justice Secretary. So incompetent was she that the Opposition had to take it upon ourselves to prepare a judicial review to do the Justice Secretary's job for her, and such was the level of chaos over which she nominally presided that the Government's own legal service was trooped out against us to defend the very sentencing guidelines that the Justice Secretary had denounced as two tier.

Mr Brash: In November 2023, the Sentencing Council consulted on these guidelines, and said that a pre-sentence report may be “particularly important” if an offender belongs to an ethnic, cultural and/or faith minority community. Does the shadow Minister agree that it was particularly important? I do not. If he does not agree, why did he say nothing for two years?

Robert Jenrick: I have to applaud the hon. Gentleman for reading out his Whips' questions there. I have said it before and I will say it again, however: I do wish that he and those on the Labour Front Bench would stop perpetuating something that is obviously untrue. They know it is untrue. It has been said numerous times. The Sentencing Council itself—[*Interruption.*] Let me finish my point, because it is important.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The shadow Lord Chancellor has just suggested that those on the Government Front Bench are perpetuating an untruth. He might like to think about whether he wishes to withdraw that comment.

Robert Jenrick: It is, I hope, inadvertent, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Sentencing Council wrote to the Lord Chancellor correcting her on this very point, and

made clear that the guidance that was put before the previous Conservative Government was materially different from the one—

Several hon. Members rose—

Robert Jenrick: Let me finish the point. If hon. Members do not like the answer, perhaps they should hear it in full.

The Sentencing Council made it clear that the guidance that was put before the previous Conservative Government was materially different from what was ultimately put before this Labour Government. The council said in the previous iteration that pre-sentencing reports would usually be required. There was a presumption that pre-sentencing reports would come forward, but importantly, it preserved full discretion. The guidance that was ultimately brought forward, which was given the nod by the Justice Secretary's officials who were present at the final meeting of the Sentencing Council, made a significant distinction: it said that such reports “must” be requested. That removed the discretion available to judges, which was a very significant difference.

Mrs Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): I have the pre-sentence report guidance in front of me. It says:

“When considering a community or custodial sentence, the court must request and consider a pre-sentence report (PSR) before forming an opinion of the sentence, unless it considers that it is unnecessary”.

It then goes on to describe various circumstances in which a pre-sentence report might be considered necessary and may “normally be considered necessary”. It does not remove judicial stipulations and interventions completely, and to suggest otherwise is not accurate.

Robert Jenrick: The guidance does not use that phrase. It says a report would “usually” be required. That is an important point, because it removes discretion. Of course, there might be instances in which a judge would not request a report, but I think it would be extremely unlikely, in practice, that a judge would choose not to take forward a pre-sentence report, in the light of the new guidance. That is why we felt it so important to take action.

Several hon. Members rose—

Robert Jenrick: Let me make some progress.

Eventually the Sentencing Council did U-turn, but not before the guidance had briefly come into force. The council took until midday on 1 April, which was several hours after the guidance had come into force, to update magistrates and judges. Its email undermined the Lord Chancellor yet again. It stated that it still believed that the guidance was “necessary and appropriate”. The whole saga has been nothing short of farcical. It has been an embarrassment. It has damaged public confidence in the justice system, and the Justice Secretary's Bill does not fix that trust deficit. It is half-baked. It is a half-job that stores up problems for another day—because, make no mistake, we will be back here again and again; it will be like Groundhog Day. The Justice Secretary has left in post at the Sentencing Council the very people who drafted these rules and declined her initial invitation to change them. She has left the system intact, and she

[Robert Jenrick]

has left the door wide open for this to happen again. That is not hypothetical. We know for a fact that more offensive two-tier sentencing guidelines are incoming.

The Sentencing Council is consulting on new immigration guidelines that water down sentences for people smugglers. If they come into force, hundreds of immigration offenders a year will not meet the 12-month threshold for automatic deportation, blowing a hole in border controls. If the Justice Secretary wanted to stop that—there are plenty of open-border activists who would oppose her—this Bill leaves her powerless to do so. She has chosen to be powerless. It is the definition of madness to repeat the same decisions and expect different results. History will keep repeating itself until Ministers take back control of sentencing frameworks. But still the Justice Secretary stands at the Dispatch Box and claims that there will be no two-tier justice under her leadership.

The Bill fixes one small element of the problem and leaves the rest of it entirely intact. It does nothing to stop the two-tier pre-sentence report guidance, which still instructs probation officers to take into account so-called intergenerational trauma—trauma suffered not by the defendant, but presumably by their ancestors. It does nothing to stop the bail guidance issued by the Ministry of Justice, which instructs officials to “prioritise” ethnic minority defendants for bail decisions—not on the facts of the offence, not on the basis of risk to the public, but because of their racial or cultural identity. It does nothing to stop the “Equal Treatment Bench Book”, the official handbook for judges, which is riddled with activist talking points, including the claim that migrants are mistreated by the press, and the adoption of a dangerously expansive definition of Islamophobia that could amount to a back-door blasphemy law.

Everywhere we look—more examples emerge every week—this ideology runs through the Ministry of Justice like rot through the rafters. The principle of equality before the law, one of the great inheritances of our country, is being systematically inverted, replaced by cultural relativism, by a hierarchy of victimhood. Some defendants are to be treated gently; others are to face the full force of the law—all depending on their background, race, religion or self-declared identity. That is not justice. It is injustice, wrapped in the language of compassion. But who is it compassionate to? The victims? Of course not; they do not get a look in.

Sir John Hayes: My right hon. Friend deserves great credit for championing the cause of justice and obliging the Government to follow suit, albeit grudgingly. Leaving aside the fundamental injustice that he describes—the two-tier justice system—does he acknowledge that what the Sentencing Council proposes and continues to do undermines popular faith in the rule of law and justice and, as the Lord Chancellor herself says, tears the whole system apart?

Robert Jenrick: That is the very real risk of what we see, not just in these aborted sentencing guidelines, but in the broader fabric of two-tier justice that we are revealing with every passing day. What we all want to see, and what I believe the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash) wants to see as well, is equality before the law. That means that in no instance should the law be

applied differently depending on the colour of people’s skin or the faith that they abide by. We must all fight against that, because it is immensely corrosive to public trust and confidence in the criminal justice system.

Mr Brash: The right hon. Member is painting a terrifying picture of our justice system. In his work, has he managed to identify when these issues all started?

Robert Jenrick: The guidelines we are talking about came into force—or would have done—under this Labour Government. I will not return to everything I said earlier, but those of us who were in this Chamber on the day that I revealed this issue all know that neither the Justice Secretary nor any of her Ministers had the faintest idea that any of this was happening. I watched the Justice Secretary look to her Ministers; she was greeted by blank faces. They had no grip on what was happening in their Department.

The hon. Member for Hartlepool makes the good point that the issues that we are discussing predate this Labour Government. This is a broader issue facing our country. We all have to be defenders of equality under the law. I do not seek equality of outcome in our criminal justice system; I seek equality of treatment. That is the heart of a fair criminal justice system. That may be a point of difference between some of us in this House. All I seek is for every person in this country—man or woman, regardless of their religion or the colour of their skin—to be treated exactly the same by the law.

Everywhere we look in the Ministry of Justice, we see this ideology. The most worrying part is that I think the Justice Secretary knows this. She stood here and said that the appearance of differential treatment before the law is particularly corrosive, and I agree wholeheartedly with her.

Mrs Russell: Will the right hon. Member give way?

Robert Jenrick: I will make progress.

The guidance does not just create the appearance of two-tier justice; it is two-tier justice. The Secretary of State cannot wash her hands of that. The bail guidance comes from her own Ministry. The pre-sentence guidance is issued by officials she oversees. The bench book is sanctioned by the Judicial College, under the watch of the Lady Chief Justice. If the Justice Secretary truly believes in equality before the law, and if her words are more than empty slogans, why is any of this happening on her watch? The truth is simple. This Bill is not the solution. It is a fig leaf. It is damage control. It is political theatre to distract from the deeper rot that the Government have permitted to fester. Until this type of guidance is ripped out, root and branch, from sentencing, bail, judicial training and appointments, the principle of equality before the law remains under direct assault.

We will not vote against the Bill, because we will never support two-tier justice, but we will not let the Justice Secretary rewrite history, either. She did not stop these rules or fight against them. She did not even know about them until we pointed them out to her. She allowed them to happen, and then panicked when the backlash came. Now she is using this House’s time to clean up her mess. She wears the robes and she dons the wig, but she is not in control of the justice system.

Despite the big talk today, there is still two-tier justice on her watch. If she continues to do so little about it, we can only conclude that, at heart, she truly supports it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Mother of the House.

8.54 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I can see that, when it comes to this legislation, I am in a minority—it is not the first time, and I suspect that it will not be the last. There has been a great deal of misinformation about the Sentencing Council's original guidelines, both in the run-up to and during the debate, so I, with all humility, want to insert some facts into the debate.

First, it is important to recognise what the Sentencing Council actually is. Much of the debate today and in recent weeks has seemed to presume that it is a bunch of heedless young barristers and social workers. On the contrary, the Sentencing Council is largely composed of some of the most senior judges in the land. They include: Lord Justice William Davis, its chair, who was called to the Bar in 1976; His Honour Judge Simon Drew, a circuit judge sitting in the Court of Appeal; Lord Justice Tim Holroyde, lord justice of appeal and vice-president of the Court of Appeal; and the honourable Mr Justice Mark Wall, who was appointed a High Court judge in 2020. There are also some senior probation officers and magistrates. That is hardly a cohort of men and women who need the firm hand of an MP on their shoulder to explain to them what the rule of law is.

Dr Caroline Johnson: The right hon. Lady is making the important point that the Sentencing Council is comprised of senior and learned individuals. Given that, what circumstances does she think conspired to let it get the guidelines so very wrong? It is clearly felt on both sides of the House that they are wrong.

Ms Abbott: I can say with confidence that the Sentencing Council is talking about issues to do with race and criminal justice because of a history, going back decades, of problematic issues in relation to race and criminal justice. I will come to those later. The independence of the Sentencing Council is crucial, and the idea that anybody in the Chamber is standing up for law and order yet seeks to undermine its independence—and by implication, that of the judiciary as a whole—is quite remarkable.

Next, what do the guidelines actually say? Much of the debate implies that black and minority persons are singled out for pre-sentence reports under the guidelines. On the contrary, there is a whole list of people in the guidelines on whom, the Sentencing Council suggests, judges and magistrates might ask for a pre-sentence report. Those persons include those at risk of committing their first custodial sentence; young adults; women; ethnic minorities; yes, cultural minorities, of course; pregnant and post-natal women; and the sole or primary carer for dependent relatives. The Sentencing Council is clear that that is not an exclusive list; ideally, every defendant should have a pre-sentence report. The aim of the guidelines is to ensure that judges and magistrates get the most information possible. Who could object to

garnering more information on any defendant? It is certainly not the intention of the guidelines to dictate the sentence in any given case.

Yet it is being argued that a pre-sentencing report will discourage a judge from sending an offender to jail. We are asked to believe that our judiciary is weak-minded and susceptible, and that it will not live up to its centuries-old standards, which, as we heard earlier, go all the way back to Magna Carta. However, the House was also told earlier that our judiciary is world-class and highly regarded. Both propositions cannot be true.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): Yes, they can.

Ms Abbott: Well, either our judiciary is world-class and highly regarded, or it is so soft-minded that the very existence of a pre-sentencing report will make it rule in a way in which it would not otherwise have ruled.

Decisions by judges and magistrates on individual cases are not the same as policy. The Sentencing Council itself is very clear that it does not seek to dictate policy; it is simply trying to ensure that judges and magistrates have the maximum amount of information. Leading King's Counsel Keir Monteith says that there has been a deliberate misreading of the rules in order to generate a row, and I believe that is correct.

Then we come to the talk, which I have heard on both sides of the House, about two-tier criminal justice. That can only mean that black defendants are treated more favourably than white defendants. Yet the facts tell us to the contrary. Ministers will be aware of the Lammy review, chaired by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy)—now the Foreign Secretary. It was a review of race in the criminal justice system, in which he found that

“Despite making up just 14% of the population,”
black and ethnic minority men and women

“make up 25% of prisoners, while over 40% of young people in custody are from BAME backgrounds.”

He added:

“If our prison population reflected the make-up of England and Wales, we would have over 9,000 fewer people in prison—the equivalent of 12 average-sized prisons.”

My right hon. Friend did not find a criminal justice system where black and brown people are treated more favourably than white people, and he did not find equality before the law. There is no reason to believe that things have changed since he drew up his review.

We need to appreciate that not only do we have a two-tier system, but it is a two-tier system in completely the opposite way to what the Lord Chancellor suggests, and it has been like that for decades. The population wants to see our two-tier criminal justice system taken seriously.

Members may remember the tragic death of Stephen Lawrence in the early 1990s. It took a Labour Government and a Labour Home Secretary to commission a judge-led inquiry into the Stephen Lawrence case. In 1999 the Macpherson inquiry reported. It spoke in an unequivocal way about institutional racism in the police service, and it spoke in a way that I had never heard it spoken about in this House or at the most senior levels in the state. Nobody since then has challenged the notion that there is institutional racism in the police.

[Ms Diane Abbott]

Do we have to have our own Macpherson inquiry into the workings of the judicial system before people will accept that institutional racism is an issue in the courts as well? It is not enough to say, “Well, you know, the facts point in that direction but we are not quite sure why the figures are like that.” We know why the figures are like that, and we have known that for decades.

If we want to win the respect of the community as a whole, we must be seen to be working towards a fair criminal justice system, not just trying to score points off the opposition; and we must look at the long term, rather than the short term. We know that, in England and Wales, black people are much more likely to be arrested than white people. Specifically, black individuals are twice as likely to be arrested as white individuals. That disparity extends to imprisonment, with black individuals being more likely to be sentenced to prison and serving longer sentences than their white counterparts. Everybody knows that people are not treated the same, and it is misleading of Members on both sides of the House to imply that that is so.

Peter Herbert, chair of the Society of Black Lawyers, said:

“We have experienced racist two-tier policing for over 500 years. If we achieve equal treatment that is not two-tier as it is long overdue. We have never asked for special treatment only equal treatment.”

The Lord Chancellor should pay attention to the wish of so many members of the community, in her constituency in Birmingham and my constituency in east London, and the wishes of so many millions of people in the community to see a fair criminal justice system that treats people fairly, not unfairly as has happened in the past. Members will know that it took the Macpherson inquiry to get a measure of understanding about criminal justice in policing.

In closing, I will say this. It is interesting to hear the banter about this issue between those on the two Front Benches, but this is not an issue for banter. This is people's lives; this is people's liberty. I do not think that the debate is enhanced by some of the Trump-like narrative that we are getting from the Opposition. We do not need Donald Trump-type politics in Britain today. We need seriousness about the unfair discrimination in the criminal justice system, and a willingness not just to talk about it, but to do something about it.

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

9.8 pm

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Liberal Democrats believe in equality before the law, Liberal Democrats believe in the rule of law, and Liberal Democrats believe that no one is above the law, so it has been heartening to hear those words echoed across the Chamber today.

But actions speak louder than words, which is why I regret to say that few have acted more to erode those legal and democratic values than the two-tier Tory party that occupies the Benches next to me—two-tier Tories who unlawfully partied in No. 10, while the rest of us missed funerals for lost relatives; two-tier Tories who unlawfully suspended Parliament to get their way, while lecturing us about the rule of law; two-tier Tories

who unlawfully approved developments for their donor mates, while purporting to talk tough on crime; and two-tier Tories whose unlawfulness, chaos and double standards landed them with the biggest election defeat in their history.

The Conservatives still have not learned, because that hypocrisy continues today in the context of the sentencing guidelines in question. They nodded through earlier editions of the guidelines when they were in government, yet they make a scene about them today now that it has become politically convenient for them to do so. According to the Sentencing Council, just one MP objected to the cohorting in the previous guidelines put out to consultation in 2023-24. I will give way to the then Home Office Minister, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), if he can confirm that it was he who made that objection. No—radio silence. *[Interruption.]*

Our country deserves better than the circumstances that have given rise to the Bill. Those circumstances are ultimately that the previous Government underfunded our probation and courts system so severely that pre-sentence reports have since been rationed and are not used universally, or indeed anywhere near it. In fact, the use of pre-sentence reports has declined by 44% over the last decade almost, according to Lord Timpson. That is despite the sentencing code having a presumption in favour of their use, regardless of any personal characteristic or circumstance.

The Liberal Democrats believe that that near-universal presumption is critical, because when the state is considering depriving someone of their liberty, judges and magistrates should be equipped with all the information possible to pass the sentence that is most likely to reduce reoffending and protect victims and survivors. Offenders need it and victims deserve it.

The Liberal Democrats believe that we should really be having a debate about how we can resource a criminal justice system that can fulfil pre-sentence reports for all offenders who need them, rather than a debate that feels grounded in rationing their use. We will therefore abstain on Second Reading, not because of indifference, but because of principled concerns that I will present constructively, to reciprocate the constructiveness with which the Secretary of State and her officials have engaged with me on this matter in recent weeks.

One concern is that this Bill simply is not necessary to achieve its stated aim. The Sentencing Council has, in response to the strength of feeling in Parliament, paused the implementation of its guidelines. It has not said how long that pause will last. My understanding is that the Department has not asked the council how long it would be willing to pause the guidelines. It seems to me that, in response to the most recent act of the Lord Chancellor, there is new-found space for an agreement to be reached, through dialogue with the Sentencing Council and the Lady Chief Justice, without a single minute of debate on primary legislation. Such legislation could then be devoted instead to patching up other injustices in our system.

Another concern is that this proposal is being rushed through without comprehensive consultation or co-ordination with wider work that is already under way. David Gauke is currently conducting an independent review of sentencing, which is due to report this spring. That review ought to have provided a clear opportunity to examine these issues in depth and to ensure that any reforms are evidence-based, balanced and considered in

the broader context of sentencing policy. If the Government are convinced that primary legislation is required, why not wait for the Gauke review to report, take advantage of that independent insight, and then introduce coherent proposals in legislation later in this Session?

An additional concern is that although the Bill ostensibly gestures towards fairness, it fails to confront some of the most pressing injustices in our criminal justice system—to which the Mother of the House, the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), referred—including those identified by the Lammy review.

We know that there is disproportionality at most stages of the criminal justice process affecting various groups, from stop and search to charging decisions, early guilty pleas and sentencing outcomes. Ethnic minority individuals, women and those with mental health issues continue to be over-represented and underserved, yet this legislation makes no attempt to address that. While I welcome the review of data that the Justice Secretary described, it is unwelcome that the outcome of that does not feature in these proposals.

Finally, I am deeply troubled with the political context in which this Bill is being introduced. It may appear technical on the surface, but the legislation risks falling into a trap in which criminal justice is used by some in this House and beyond to stoke division, appeal to populist headlines and wage a cynical culture war. We must not allow our courts and sentencing practices to become pawns in that political game, nor part of a second stab at a Tory leadership campaign.

It is critical that in this debate and in any reform we make to sentencing policy, we lead with an evidence-based process and with a determination to tackle the injustices embedded in our criminal justice system, whether it is those disproportionately affecting women, ethnic minorities or white working-class boys—the list continues. We urge the Government to listen, reflect and return with proposals that work with the Sentencing Council, with the judiciary and with the findings of David Gauke's independent sentencing review. Only then can we abolish the unjust two-tier system created under the two-tier Tories.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): After the Chair of the Justice Committee, I propose to introduce a four-minute time limit. I am conscious that many Members will be disappointed this evening.

9.16 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): Let me begin by summarising how we got here. On 29 November 2023, the Sentencing Council launched a consultation on proposed changes to the imposition of community and custodial sentences guideline. On 19 February 2024, the then Minister for Sentencing, the hon. Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), wrote to the chair of the council and welcomed its work on the revised guideline, in particular the

“fuller guidance around the circumstances in which courts should request a pre-sentence report”.

On 28 March 2024, the then Chair of the Justice Committee, Sir Bob Neill KC, wrote to the chair of the Sentencing Council noting that the council had conducted a particularly effective consultation exercise.

On 5 March 2025, a year later, the Sentencing Council published the revised guideline, saying that it would come into effect on 1 April. The same day saw the first exchange in this Chamber between the Lord Chancellor and the shadow Lord Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), on the guideline. The accusation by the shadow Lord Chancellor that the guideline would

“make a custodial sentence less likely”

for those from an ethnic minority, cultural minority and/or faith minority community was not the view of the Sentencing Council, but the exchange led to extensive correspondence between the Lord Chancellor and the chair of the Sentencing Council for the rest of March.

I do not have time today to describe the contents of those letters, but the central point raised by the chair of the Sentencing Council was that the purpose of a pre-sentence report is to provide information, not to determine the sentence. He said:

“Frequently the information provided will not assist the offender's prospect of avoiding a custodial sentence: rather the reverse.”

He added that the guideline does not make a custodial sentence less likely for someone simply by way of their membership of a cohort; that the guideline

“does not instruct or mandate judges and magistrates to request a pre-sentence report”

but is discretionary; that the list of cohorts is “non-exhaustive”; that a pre-sentence report “may be necessary” for those outside the list; and that,

“The section of the guideline relating to pre-sentence reports is directed to the issue of information about offenders, no more and no less.”

On 31 March 2025, following a meeting with the Sentencing Council, the Lord Chancellor said she was going to introduce legislation to render the section on cohorts unlawful. The guideline was due to come into force on 1 April. As a result, the council said that it would delay the date on which the guideline was due to come into force, pending such legislation taking effect.

On 1 April 2025, this Bill was given its First Reading. The Bill is designed to make it unlawful for a sentencing guideline issued by the Sentencing Council to include a presumption that a pre-sentence report should be obtained based on the offender's membership of a particular demographic cohort. The Bill has one operative clause, clause 1, which would amend section 120 of the Coroners and Justice Act 2009. The drafting of clause 1 indicates that the provision will apply to all sentencing guidelines that have been issued by the Sentencing Council and that are already in force when the provisions in this Bill take effect.

The Bill states that guidelines produced by the Sentencing Council cannot include provision framed by reference to “personal characteristics”. The Bill then specifies that “‘personal characteristics’ include, in particular...race...religion or belief...cultural background.”

The list is non-exhaustive and therefore also covers other personal characteristics—for example, age, disability, sex and sexual orientation. Clause 1 would therefore render unlawful the following cohorts that were included in the imposition of community and custodial sentences guideline issued on 5 March:

“a young adult...female...from an ethnic minority, cultural minority, and/or faith minority community...pregnant or post-natal...has disclosed they are transgender...has or may have a serious chronic medical condition or physical disability, or mental ill health, learning disabilities...or brain injury/damage”.

[Andy Slaughter]

The explanatory notes state that the Bill does not prevent the Sentencing Council “from issuing guidelines advising courts to consider the offender’s personal circumstances in deciding whether to request a PSR”.

The explanatory notes also state that the Bill does not affect Court of Appeal case law on the circumstances where a pre-sentence report is either necessary or desirable. It then cites three cases:

“Thompson...which says that where a woman who is pregnant or has recently given birth is to be sentenced, it is desirable for the court to obtain a pre-sentence report;...Meanley...where the court referred to the importance of PSRs in serious cases involving young defendants; and...Kurmekaj...where the court said that the defendant’s traumatic upbringing, vulnerability and the fact they had been a victim of modern slavery meant a PSR should have been requested”.

The Government have repeatedly emphasised that they object to the inclusion of ethnic, cultural and/or faith minority community in the guideline. The Government have not said that they object to the inclusion of the other cohorts in the guideline framed by personal characteristics. The fact that the explanatory notes make clear that the Government do not intend to prevent the Court of Appeal, or any other body, from issuing guidance relating to pre-sentence reports from being framed by personal characteristics, other than ethnic, cultural and/or faith minority community, would appear to indicate that they do not object in principle to such an approach. I am sure some of these matters can be explored more in Committee.

I will conclude by saying a few words about judicial independence. In his letter dated 10 March to the Lord Chancellor, the chair of the Sentencing Council said:

“There is general acceptance of the guidelines by the judiciary because they emanate from an independent body on which judicial members are in the majority. The Council preserves the critical constitutional position of the independent judiciary in relation to sentencing.”

The independence of the judiciary is recognised as a principle of fundamental importance to the United Kingdom’s constitution. The principle serves to protect the judiciary’s ability to exercise its functions in deciding cases in accordance with the law and free from external pressures. Deciding on an offender’s sentence is a clear example of that, but the principle of judicial independence also requires that the judiciary is treated with respect and with recognition of the constitutional boundaries between the judiciary, the Executive and Parliament.

Lord Hodge, the deputy president of the Supreme Court, said in 2018:

“Within Parliament it is a parliamentary custom, supported by rulings of the Speaker, that an attack on a judge’s character or motives, or charges of a personal nature or a call for his or her dismissal, should be made only on a substantive motion on which a vote will be taken, and also that arguments that a judge had got a decision wrong should be made in moderate language.”

There has been significant criticism of the Sentencing Council, and in particular its chair, in this Chamber. The shadow Lord Chancellor asked on 1 April in this House if the Lord Chancellor could

“honestly say at the Dispatch Box that she has confidence in the head of the Sentencing Council, Lord Justice Davis, given that he has brought it into total disrepute”—[*Official Report*, 1 April 2025; Vol. 765, c. 184.]

Criticising the judiciary for their decisions in their capacity as members of the Sentencing Council risks undermining their independence as serving judges.

It remains to be seen whether the measures in this Bill have ripples beyond the narrow prescription in clause 1. I look forward to the Government clarifying the detailed effects of the Bill in Committee, but it would be unfortunate if such a modest piece of legislation left in its wake collateral damage to the relationship between Parliament, the Executive and the judiciary.

9.25 pm

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): It is important in this debate to be clear what we are talking about and what we are not. The part of the guideline produced by the Sentencing Council that led to this legislation relates to the circumstances in which a pre-sentence report is produced, not to the passing of a sentence itself. It is also important not to overstate the problem. As we have heard, there is already law that says there should be a pre-sentence report in almost all cases, unless it is unnecessary, and most offenders being considered for either a community or custodial sentence—in the Crown court, at least—already have one.

The guidance that the Sentencing Council produces on the ordering of a pre-sentence report, though, does matter. That is because such a report is designed to give sentencers more information about the person they are sentencing. Without that information, it can be very hard to apply the full range of sentencing options. That might be about whether a rehabilitation activity requirement or a programme requirement might be appropriate, or to assess capacity for unpaid work. If a sentencer does not order a pre-sentence report for a particular offender, they may not be able to impose some of the more demanding community sentences and may find themselves more likely to impose a custodial sentence as the only available and realistic alternative. It does matter whether a sentencer is being encouraged to order such a report for an offender, and any guideline suggesting that this should be more appropriate for someone of one ethnicity, faith or culture, as opposed to another, cannot be right.

I accept that the Sentencing Council was trying to do good, but in reality we do not address inequality by replacing it with a different inequality. The Sentencing Council has misjudged this issue, and the Government are entitled to come to that view too. It would have been better if legislation was not needed to resolve this issue, but the Sentencing Council, independent as we know it is, has clearly concluded that it will not do as the Lord Chancellor has asked, and that means that legislation is the only realistic alternative. However, I have concerns about the way in which the Government are going about this, particularly in the breadth of the drafting of the Bill. I mentioned in an intervention on the Lord Chancellor one specific concern, which I will not go over again in view of the time, but which we might return to in the later stages of the Bill.

I think it is worth Ministers considering whether the use of the phrase “personal characteristics” is too broad. The Chair of the Justice Committee read out some of the other personal characteristics referred to in the draft guideline, which I do not think are anywhere near as controversial. We need to keep in mind that this is about a process in which a sentencer is given information

about an offender in order to determine the appropriate sentence. I do not think that information about faith or ethnic origin would fall into the appropriate category, but information about health conditions or disabilities most certainly might.

There is a danger of throwing the baby out with the bathwater: not all personal characteristics should be left out of account in sentencing. I therefore ask Ministers to consider whether they can tighten the wording of clause 1(2) and (3) in particular. If they do so, I think that will avoid some rather arcane discussions about what can be properly described as personal circumstances and personal characteristics. However, I also think there is a danger of losing sight of the good work that the Sentencing Council does.

I accept that this will not be a universally popular point of view, but I do think that the Sentencing Council adds something important to the sentencing process. It is important that we do not lose sight of that, or of the fact that the guideline that has been drafted is to replace substantially out-of-date guidance. I hope that point will also be noted by Ministers.

9.29 pm

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): While I acknowledge that the updated Sentencing Council guidelines attempted to address inequalities in the criminal justice system, we must maintain the principle of equality before the law. As such, I support this Bill. I note, however, that the Bill does not prevent the Sentencing Council from issuing guidelines advising the courts to consider an offender's personal circumstances when deciding whether to request a pre-sentence report, particularly when those circumstances are uniquely linked to their personal characteristics.

Pre-sentence reports are desirable when the defendant is a vulnerable woman who has committed a less serious crime—for instance, when they are pregnant or post-natal, the primary carer for dependent children, or a victim of domestic abuse or exploitation. Of course, those issues are often compounded when we consider intersectionalities, such as those experienced by black women. So many women in the criminal justice system are vulnerable: nearly two thirds are victims of domestic abuse, a similar percentage have children, and many have experienced adverse childhood experiences and trauma. Those vulnerability factors make it critical that personal circumstances affecting female offenders are given consideration in pre-sentence reporting.

Women in custody have complex health needs, which can increase the risks associated with pregnancy for mothers and their children. Babies born in prison are twice as likely to be born premature and seven times more likely to be stillborn. These are not just numbers; they affect real people, women who are already experiencing trauma and babies entering the world in incredibly difficult circumstances. Consideration of pregnancy and the associated risks to mothers, their unborn children and their newborn babies is therefore critical in determining appropriate sentencing. Custodial sentences can often do more harm than good, both to pregnant women and to their children. Women are far less likely on average to commit violent or sexual offences, and are far more likely to be charged with petty crime, non-violent crime

and theft. In those cases, community sentences may be preferred, so long as the offender does not present a risk to wider society.

In April 2024, the Sentencing Council introduced a new mitigating factor—pregnancy, childbirth and post-natal care—in sentencing guidelines to consider the impact of custody on pregnant offenders and their dependants. This factor recognises that when the impact on offenders' dependants would be disproportionate to the aims of custodial sentencing, imprisonment should not be imposed. Specifically, it relates to whether the risk posed to women and their dependants outweighs the risk associated with their crime, in order to determine a fair sentence for all—both for wider society, and for the offender and her children. It is critical that the justice system strikes the right balance when determining sentencing, and a pre-sentence report can inform this. As such, I am particularly glad that this Bill does not affect Court of Appeal case law on when pre-sentence reports are necessary or desirable in cases concerning women who are pregnant, are victims of domestic abuse, or have recently given birth.

I believe that many of the issues raised today speak to a wider issue pertaining to women's experiences in the justice and sentencing system more broadly. Ensuring access to pre-sentence reports helps courts to make informed, fair and just decisions, and for women in vulnerable circumstances, that can make all the difference.

9.33 pm

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): This Bill is unfortunately necessary because of the unwise actions of the Sentencing Council. While the Lord Chancellor is right to bring the Bill forward, she did so only at the very last moment. It was on Monday 31 March, mere hours before the guidelines were due to come into force, that the Sentencing Council was forced to perform a U-turn. Those guidelines would have led to a two-tier justice system in England and Wales.

The Sentencing Council did not withdraw those guidelines out of wisdom or principle—it did so because it was caught out. Its backtrack was quietly communicated to judges and magistrates several hours after courts had already opened on Tuesday. To make matters worse, the Sentencing Council's message said that it still believed the policy was necessary. There was nothing necessary about that policy.

Under the proposed guidelines, judges and magistrates were told that pre-sentence reports should normally be required when sentencing individuals from ethnic, faith or cultural minority groups. What about those who are white, male and not part of a specified minority? They would not have fallen within that description. The implication was clear: defendants will be treated differently, not based on their actions or the harm they have caused, but based on their identity, and that is wrong. It was only after the intervention of my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), the shadow Justice Secretary, that the Lord Chancellor rightly took action. Race, culture and religion should never determine whether someone goes to prison. The Lord Chancellor said that she was willing to legislate to stop this travesty if the Sentencing Council refused to back down, and that is what we are now doing.

[Sir Ashley Fox]

This is about the most fundamental principle in a free society: equality before the law. The question we must now ask ourselves is how the Sentencing Council got this so badly wrong and, judging by the comments of Lord Justice Davis, would continue to get wrong. The Sentencing Council's guidelines would have had real consequences. In borderline cases where a judge is unsure whether to issue a custodial sentence, the presence or absence of a pre-sentence report can be decisive. The whole purpose of these reports is to influence the outcome. By tilting the system toward giving those reports preferentially to certain identity groups, the council would effectively be tipping the scales of justice, and the council knows it. Baroness Falkner, chair of the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, has warned that the guidelines may violate the Equality Act 2010.

If we allow sentencing outcomes to be guided by race, faith or cultural identity, we abandon the core British principle that the law applies equally to all of us. I agree with the Lord Chancellor that we should pass this legislation to override this guidance, but how confident is she that we will not face a similar situation again? I would like her to go further and ensure that Parliament is given oversight of all future sentencing guidance. We must put into law the principle that no factor like race, religion or cultural minority status should ever influence sentencing procedures. Justice must remain blind, not selectively blinkered. If we lose equal justice, we lose the foundation of a free society.

9.37 pm

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): I welcome this Bill and the swift action taken by the Lord Chancellor to correct a clear wrong. Had they been implemented, the Sentencing Council's new guidelines would have introduced differential treatments before the law, which can never and should never be acceptable. The question is: how did we get to this point? Did these guidelines simply appear out of nowhere? Of course they did not. They were subject to extensive consultation under the previous Conservative Government, who welcomed them without reservation.

The consultation published in November 2023 and closed in February 2024 indicated clearly that a pre-sentence report "may be particularly important" if the offender belonged to ethnic, cultural or faith minority communities. The then Conservative sentencing Minister, the hon. Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon) wrote to the Sentencing Council, thanking it and welcoming the expanded guidance on the circumstances in which courts should seek pre-sentence reports. Let us be crystal clear: it was the last Conservative Government who endorsed the idea that it was "particularly important" to request pre-sentence reports for individuals from ethnic, cultural or faith minority backgrounds and therefore, by extension of basic logic, less important for other groups. The Sentencing Council had their answer: the then Conservative Government supported its changes.

Given what we have heard today, there must surely have been a flurry of opposition in certain quarters. What did the now shadow Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) say about it at the time? The answer is nothing. What did the Leader of the Opposition say? Nothing. Perhaps if they had

bothered to stand up and do their job, as Labour has today, these guidelines would never have been issued in the first place.

For all the failings of the last Conservative Government, many Members were appalled by the outright refusal of the Sentencing Council to amend the guidelines when requested to do so by the Justice Secretary. That refusal is the reason we find ourselves here today. Far too much of the British state now appears to operate beyond the reach of those democratically elected to lead it. There are too many quangos, too many faceless bureaucracies, too many levers of power seemingly detached from those whom the people have chosen to govern them. The British public do not understand how a court can block the deportation of a convicted criminal whom the Government wish to remove from the country. They do not understand how a Chancellor is constrained in his or her decision-making by the actions of an unelected Office for Budget Responsibility, and they do not understand how a Justice Secretary cannot simply prevent unequal treatment before the law.

The Bill is the right response to this specific situation, but how long will it be before we find ourselves here again, in another stand-off with the Sentencing Council, over another issue on which unelected officials clash with democratically accountable politicians? I believe that in the fullness of time—and I welcome what the Lord Chancellor said today about her further review—we will have to go further; I believe that we should abolish the Sentencing Council altogether.

9.41 pm

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): What the Sentencing Council ludicrously proposed was nothing short of two-tier justice: guidelines which would mean that young black, Asian or indeed other non-white offenders could receive more lenient sentences than their white counterparts in exactly the same circumstances. Let me be clear: justice must be equality before the law. As someone once said,

"justice should not only be done, but...be seen to be done".

It should not depend on your race, the colour of your skin, your culture or your religion. It is high time we reminded the unelected, unaccountable, and quite frankly woke quangos that equality means treating everyone the same, and not creating one rule for some and one rule for others.

I am therefore glad that we have finally reached the Second Reading of a Bill that will stop the madness espoused by this out-of-touch, "liberal dinner party set" advisory body. For far too long, bodies such as the Sentencing Council have been allowed to rule the roost. Quangos of this kind—unserious and wasteful organisations—are costing the taxpayer more than £64 billion a year. Parliament must be sovereign, and should not continue to come up against a brick wall of regulatory and bureaucratic obstacles.

I cannot help having a sense of déjà vu. I was sitting in this very place well over a month ago when my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), the shadow Lord Chancellor, introduced legislation that would have prevented this slide into two-tier justice—and all the while, the Lord Chancellor allowed the chairman of the Sentencing Council to effectively run rings around her, the Government and the will of the House. Let us

stop pretending: sadly, two-tier justice does exist, and the British people know it. Let us look at the facts. People are being thrown into jail for making stupid comments online, while grooming gangs were able to operate unchallenged because of a fear of cultural sensitivities. This is wrong, and the British people demand that it end now. However, it is not happening just in the courts. Police forces in the UK have been caught blocking white applicants from jobs, and that was based not on ability but purely on the colour of their skin.

How on earth did we get here? This is the country of the Magna Carta, the birthplace of common law and some of the greatest legal minds that the world has ever seen, yet we have enabled an unelected quango to propose guidelines that are openly discriminatory, and equality before the law has been replaced by ideology over fairness.

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

9.43 pm

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): Equality before the law is at the heart of the rule of law. As the great Roman statesman Cicero said:

“For rights that were not open to all alike would be no rights.”

The revised guidelines from the Sentencing Council fundamentally went against that important principle. To introduce a presumption that pre-sentence reports would be required not necessarily because of a particular vulnerability of offenders or circumstances related to their offences, but because of the colour of their skin, the region of their ancestors’ origin or the religious beliefs that they held is two-tier justice, no matter how laudable the intentions. This is not about Court of Appeal judgments such as Thompson, which the Lord Chancellor referred to, and it is not about factors that could fundamentally change the effect of a particular judicial sentences on an offender, or factors relating directly to the circumstances of the offence. This is purely about those characteristics.

My right hon. Friend the shadow Lord Chancellor did a huge service to not only this House but our country when he raised this matter from the Dispatch Box on 5 March, because it was clear that the Lord Chancellor was completely blindsided. Neither she nor her Ministers knew anything about the proposals. In fairness to the right hon. Lady, who is not in her seat at the moment, I am sure that she was as appalled as we were at the idea that people should be treated differently purely because of their ethnicity, culture or religion. But this is a lacklustre Bill, which does the minimum needed to clear up the immediate mess of this Government’s making. *[Interruption.]* As I said, it does the minimum necessary. It is better than nothing—it is a very small step in the right direction—but it does not go as far as the Government should to introduce the reforms that are needed.

The right hon. Lady had been Lord Chancellor for eight months, but she had so little grip of her Department that she not only did nothing to stop the Sentencing Council’s new guidelines, but was not even aware of them. Her representative had met the Sentencing Council just two days earlier. What were they doing at the Sentencing Council, if they were not there to stop such

proposals? How is the right hon. Lady running her Department, if she was not even informed of the new guidelines?

The proposals had changed during the process. The Lord Chancellor, unlike me and the Business Secretary, has actually been a practising lawyer. She will understand that there is a substantial difference between saying that a pre-sentence report may be particularly important, and stating, as a requirement, that such a report will normally be considered necessary, given the effect that statement has, and the triggers for appeals against sentences. Those changes were made almost at the point when the right hon. Lady became Lord Chancellor, yet eight months later, she had done nothing to stop them and was not even aware of them.

This Bill stops only the narrowest and worst aspects of the guidelines from applying. If the Government were actually serious about taking action, they could have done so much more quickly. They did not even need to take action; an omission would have been sufficient. On 28 March, when my right hon. Friend the shadow Lord Chancellor brought forward his private Member’s Bill, all the Government Whips had to do was not shout “Object” in order for it to go forward. It would have restored proper ministerial oversight and, through the Minister, parliamentary oversight over sentencing guidelines. That would have allowed Parliament to take control of this fundamental matter.

James Wild: My hon. Friend is right; the issue is not just these guidelines. In the last Parliament, we legislated to increase the maximum sentence for causing death by dangerous driving to life imprisonment, after an offender killed three members of my constituent’s family and was given a sentence of only 10 and a half years. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need a broader power, so that where Parliament’s intent is not recognised by the Sentencing Council, we can act?

Mike Wood: Clearly, Parliament needs to have oversight of revisions to sentencing guidelines, so that they reflect the will of Parliament.

The Government failed to act and have now brought forward this lacklustre measure. In the past few months, my hon. and right hon. Friends have uncovered multiple instances of two-tier principles being applied to bail, probation and other judicial matters. This is not a one-off, or a whistleblowing “fix it and move on” situation; it is systemic and endemic. We need much more radical reform than the Government are bringing forward today.

Mrs Russell: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mike Wood: I have to wrap up. When will the Government get serious, get a grip and put an end to this, once and for all?

9.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Sir Nicholas Dakin): I thank all right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House for their valuable contributions. I think what I heard at the end from the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood), was support for this Bill, and I thank him for that. Today’s debate has been helpful; it has underscored the broad support for

[Sir Nicholas Dakin]

this legislation, and for the principle of equality before the law. Many Members—pretty much every Member who has spoken—underlined the importance of that principle. I am proud that my right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor acted so swiftly to address this situation in a way that was courteous and respectful to all involved, and to get us to where we are today.

While we have had much agreement, the Mother of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), for whom I have the highest regard, announced herself as being in a minority of one. I am sure that is not the case, but she drew attention to her serious concerns about disproportionality in the criminal justice system. I can say to her that we share her concerns about disproportionality. That is why my right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor has announced a proper review of all the data, so we will know what actions will properly address that disproportionality and bring about change in a way that addresses the seriousness of the unfairness in the system to which she rightly referred.

Equality before the law is a fundamental principle of our criminal justice system. It is the Government's policy and belief that it should be protected. We know that more must be done to address inequalities in the justice system, and we are absolutely committed to tackling racial disparities across the criminal justice system. We are also taking steps such as increasing diversity in our staff and working with the judiciary to make sure that our appointments are reflective of the society we serve. That has included supporting under-represented groups in joining the judiciary and the magistrates, and has involved the Ministry of Justice and partners running widely supported outreach programmes to reduce barriers to individuals joining. However, we need to do much more. I commend my right hon. Friend the Mother of the House for keeping us on notice, and I promise her that we will deliver.

The hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde), who speaks for the Liberal Democrats, reminded us, as indeed did my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash), that these guidelines were nodded through by the previous Conservative Government. The hon. Member for Eastbourne also reminded us of our inheritance of an underfunded probation and court system, which has led, in his words, to a rationing of pre-sentence reports. I agree with him that the debate should be about how we move to universality of pre-sentence reports, not about rationing. Of course, none of this debate alters the fact that independent judges can ask for pre-sentence reports whenever they feel they are necessary. Indeed, in her opening speech, the Lord Chancellor made it clear that capacity is being increased, quite properly, so that more pre-sentence reports can be done.

We had very helpful contributions from the Chair of the Justice Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter), and the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam (Sir Jeremy Wright). Both of them drew attention to the importance of pre-sentence reports in identifying the most appropriate and effective sentence for individual offenders. The Chair of the Select Committee gave us the full timeline of this affair to date, and a good analysis of where we are with the Bill. I agree with him that we will have more opportunity to look at matters in

detail in Committee. Likewise, the right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam drew attention to his concerns about the breadth of the Bill. Again, we will have an opportunity to examine them further in Committee.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner) raised very serious concerns about issues relating to pregnant women, and was pleased that the Bill does not affect Court of Appeal case law in that respect. In fact, nothing in the Bill, as she helpfully reminded the House, prevents judges from requesting PSRs for pregnant women. Judges will continue to be able to request PSRs in cases where they ordinarily would, including appropriate cases involving pregnant women. We would expect that to continue.

I am happy to have heard so much support for the Bill. There will be a drop-in for MPs on Monday about the next stages of the Bill, at which Members can have any questions answered, and can feed into the process before Committee stage next week. This emergency legislation, while a small Bill, is of great significance. It will stop the Sentencing Council's updated guidelines on pre-sentence reports from coming into force, and will safeguard against the risk of differential treatment arising from their use. The action taken by the Government on this issue underscores our commitment to equality before the law, which all hon. Members who have spoken today have underlined, and which is most important. It is the ancient principle on which our justice system was built. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

SENTENCING GUIDELINES (PRE-SENTENCE REPORTS) BILL: PROGRAMME

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Sentencing Guidelines (Pre-sentence Reports) Bill:

Committal

(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

Proceedings in Committee, on Consideration and on Third Reading

(2) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after their commencement.

(3) Any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion four hours after the commencement of proceedings in Committee of the whole House.

(4) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings in Committee of the whole House, to any proceedings on Consideration or to proceedings on Third Reading.

Other proceedings

(5) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—
(Gerald Jones.)

Question agreed to.

PETITION

Water Quality on the River Yare

9.56 pm

Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): I rise to present a petition about the water quality on the River Yare, and I hope the Government will take note

of the 254 residents who have signed it. The signatures were gathered by residents of Bawburgh, who worked hard to collect support from nearly every household in one of my picturesque South Norfolk villages. This demonstrates the strength of feeling about the risks to both people and wildlife when our waterways are not properly protected.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of South Norfolk,

Declares that the water quality on the River Yare is deeply concerning, putting wildlife and people at risk.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to clean up British waterways, call upon Anglian Water to uphold the highest possible water quality levels, and for the Environment Agency to provide residents with the information they need so they can enjoy the River Yare all year round.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P003056]

Coalfields Regeneration Trust

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

9.58 pm

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I want to start by acknowledging the death of the Holy Father yesterday. Many people in Newcastle-under-Lyme, up and down the kingdom and across the world will be feeling his death deeply. Our thoughts are with the Catholic community the world over, and all who admired him.

This week, we mark St George's day 2025. As I have said in this House before, I am proud of my Britishness and my Englishness, and I say a very happy St George's day to my constituents back home in Newcastle-under-Lyme and to people right across England.

The case for Government support for the Coalfields Regeneration Trust makes itself. I want to start by thanking all those at the trust for their work. Support for the trust aligns very closely with the Government's priorities for our country. The trust provides support to some of our most deprived communities, and its work continues the legacy of the last Labour Government and the late former Deputy Prime Minister, Lord Prescott.

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): As my hon. Friend says, John Prescott founded the Coalfields Regeneration Trust under the previous Labour Government, championing community wealth building in former coalfield areas like my constituency. I thank Richard Stevens and the CRT team, who run an excellent community health and employment programme in Meir, in my constituency, which helped 19 people to secure full-time employment between April and September 2024 alone. Will my hon. Friend join me in recognising the critical work being done by the CRT in my constituency?

Adam Jogee: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for intervention, not least because my wife and I were at Trentham Gardens in her patch at the weekend. I am very pleased she was the first person to intervene, and I agree wholeheartedly with her tribute.

Some 5.7 million people live in Britain's coalfields—one in 10 people in England and Scotland, and one in four in Wales. Almost half of coalfield communities—43%—are in the 30% most deprived communities in the United Kingdom. The number of health problems faced by those in coalfield communities is higher than the national average. According to the 2024 "State of the Coalfields" report, 7% of all coalfield residents report bad or very bad health, and more than 10% claim disability benefits—7.7% higher than the UK average. As I have said in this House before, life expectancy is a year lower than the UK average, too.

I will turn now to the rate of growth in the number of jobs in coalfield communities.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): The reality is that the Coalfields Regeneration Trust has an excellent record in the former coalfield communities, particularly in relation to much-needed job creation, as my hon. Friend has just mentioned. Does he agree that the UK Government should be looking to review the support that was afforded to the CRT before 2015, which was similar to what is still happening in Scotland and Wales?

Adam Jogee: I agree, and I will make that specific request later in my remarks. My hon. Friend raises a very good point; I join him in calling on Government to step up and help to deliver for my constituents and his. I am sorry to say that I was not in his patch at the weekend, but I am looking forward to an invitation before too long.

The former coalfields have a job density of only 57 employee jobs per 100 working-age residents, compared with a national average of 73 per 100 and 88 per 100 in the main regional cities. More than 18.7% of people living in the coalfields—many of whom are represented by hon. Members in the Chamber this evening—are classed as economically inactive. That must change, and it forms a key part of my focus as the Member of Parliament for Newcastle-under-Lyme.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way—we are near enough neighbours in our neck of the woods, aren't we? We often see digital skills gaps in areas of deprivation. In Swadlincote, in my constituency, one in four children are living in poverty. It is an ex-mining community—that is deeply embedded in who they are. Does my hon. Friend agree that when the Government are looking at upskilling for jobs for the future, they should prioritise ex-coalfield mining communities?

Adam Jogee: I agree wholeheartedly with my hon. Friend, and not for the first time. I would make that call not just for Derbyshire, but for Staffordshire, too.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose*—

Adam Jogee: The hon. Member for Strangford, of course, wants to intervene.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is fast making a name for himself in this House on behalf of his constituents for his assiduity and commitment, and we congratulate him on that. I made some inquiries back home before this debate—and I was speaking to him yesterday—about those who gave so much for the energy needs of the nation and for the industries in my town of Newtownards. The coal used by those who owned the shops in Newtownards for many years, way back when coal was the main source of energy, came from the hon. Gentleman's constituency, so he has a close relationship with us from that point of view. Does he agree that it is past time that the Government helped to address the imbalance and disadvantage to ensure that the people in his constituency are rewarded for their hard work over all those years?

Adam Jogee: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. My wife is from Northern Ireland, so when he said he was making inquiries, I was worried how far that was going to go. He raises a very important point, both about the power of British coal and the importance of Newcastle-under-Lyme for many parts of our United Kingdom.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): To follow the point made by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), it is about not just the contribution that those communities made to our energy needs, but the pride that those communities had in the work that they did. One of the successful parts of the

Coalfields Regeneration Trust's work, certainly in North Staffordshire, has been allowing the communities who had so much taken from them with the closure of the pits to restore some of that by controlling their own destiny and the sorts of regeneration that came, including through the industrial units that we now have near Silverdale in his constituency. That was done by John Prescott and the Coalfields Regeneration Trust and it has allowed communities to once again have pride in where they live and what they do. This work was done with them, rather than to them. When the Minister responds, could he say something about how the next stage of work in the coalfield communities could be done with the communities, rather than to them? I think we would all be interested in that.

Adam Jogee: My hon. Friend and neighbour makes the important point that this is about pride, power and people. The sooner we see the Government respond positively to his calls and to the calls of many on the Labour Benches, the better.

Wages in the former coalfield communities are 6% to 7% lower than the national average. There is a shortage of quality jobs, as we have heard, leading to a brain drain, as working-age residents with degree-level qualifications leave to find jobs elsewhere. This is a dangerous cycle; our young people are forced to leave their communities to find the best jobs. It leaves communities like mine losing out not just on economic growth, but on the energy and dynamism that young people bring to the job market.

Sally Jameson (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. Does he agree that it is imperative that the Government stand firm on their agenda to invest in green industries? Members on the Opposition Benches, who I notice are not in their places tonight, want to cancel that green agenda, which will not just cancel opportunities for coalfields like ours to re-industrialise and provide those high-skilled, high-wage jobs of the future, but jeopardise the opportunity for this country as a whole to have cheaper and more secure energy.

Adam Jogee: My hon. Friend makes a very good point and I agree with her wholeheartedly. It says a lot that people who have been mouthing off in recent weeks and months are missing in action this evening.

The 2024 "State of the Coalfields" report found that, "if the coalfields had been a region in their own right, all clustered together in one corner of the country, the statistics would probably show them to be the most deprived region in the United Kingdom."

That is unacceptable and it says a lot. It would be the responsibility of any Government of this country to address this disparity, but for a Labour Government, it must be our duty to do so. Our movement was born in the coalfields, ensuring that communities like mine in Newcastle-under-Lyme could prosper and thrive, while making sure that local people had a fair go, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) alluded to. That is why, in 1999, the last Labour Government set up the Coalfields Regeneration Trust. It was created to support the regeneration of coalfield communities, and it did just that. Since 1999, the CRT

has helped 26,332 people into work, created and safeguarded 5,174 jobs, and helped 341,871 people to improve their health and wellbeing.

Elaine Stewart (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests; I was a manager at the CRT. Every week, I see at first hand the positive impact that the CRT has had in our communities. It has been instrumental in developing after-school care and breakfast clubs in Dronagan, one of the most deprived areas in East Ayrshire. It has helped to support families into work and provided healthy food options. Does my hon. Friend agree that, with the support of the UK Government, the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, which is already embedded in our coalfield communities, is well placed to provide health and wellbeing projects, particularly for young people, such as after-school care clubs, employability schemes and weekend support sessions?

Adam Jogee: How lucky are we to have my hon. Friend's experience and background on these Benches? I defer to her both in terms of her commitment to the cause and her experience of standing up for the very people that we on the Government Benches are here to speak up for this evening.

If these themes sound familiar it is because they closely align, as my hon. Friend has said, with the priorities of this Labour Government: to improve our national health; to get Britain working again; to improve our skills provision; and to ensure that people can get and stay in stable, well-paid and fulfilling work.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Adam Jogee: I will happily give way to another Staffordshire man.

Dave Robertson: I thank my hon. Friend from the great county of Staffordshire. The Coalfields Regeneration Trust does great work in my constituency, working alongside some charities in Chasetown to employ a counsellor to support people back into work. Does he agree that much of the work that we need to do on regeneration is not about buildings, but about the people who work in those buildings? It is about respecting the contributions that those communities have made and making sure that they have the support they need to be able to contribute in the future.

Adam Jogee: I am grateful for the intervention from my hon. Friend, who has a much better head of hair than his predecessor—and it is his. He makes a very good point. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central, pride, power and people must drive us as we move forward.

Despite 15 years of Conservative-led Governments failing the CRT and, by extension, our coalfield communities, the CRT has still managed to create an asset base worth £55.5 million, supporting almost 3,500 jobs.

Alison Taylor (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. The Coalfields Regeneration Trust has an innovative approach

to its financial model. It develops new industrial units for small and medium-sized enterprises and start-up businesses. This, importantly, creates new business communities, which fuel local economies. Moreover, it provides the Coalfields Regeneration Trust with income-producing investments, helping to underwrite its financial stability.

Adam Jogee: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. She speaks to the cross-nation commitment to this issue, and about the many people who live in, work in and benefit from the potential in our coalfield communities.

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the huge benefits of the trust has been its investment in projects supporting young people in our coalfield communities? Although the Scottish Government have provided continued support to the trust, that support has declined in monetary value over the past decade. That represents an opportunity cost for vital projects for coalfield communities, including in my constituency. As we are urging the Government here to ensure that support is adequate for the trust, does my hon. Friend agree that the same principle applies to Scotland as well?

Adam Jogee: My hon. Friend raises a very good point. I suspect that the reason he is here, joined by many Labour colleagues from Scotland, is that the SNP Government were found wanting on a number of issues. Thanks to this Labour Government's Budget, at the end of last year Scotland had an increase in the last financial year of £1.5 billion. There is no excuse for them not to turn up and do the job properly. I feel sure that my hon. Friend, alongside many others, will be holding the SNP Government to account.

I have seen the positive impact of the CRT at work in my constituency. Fourteen local organisations are part of the free membership programme CRT Support, including charities I have worked closely with, such as the excellent Tri Services and Veterans Support Centre right in the heart of Newcastle-under-Lyme.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): My hon. Friend and constituency neighbour is making an excellent case about the work of the Coalfields Regeneration Trust in Newcastle-under-Lyme. In Stoke-on-Trent North, in partnership with Stoke City Community Trust, the CRT delivers the "Game On" football project for 11 to 18-year-olds at Norton cricket club. Does my hon. Friend agree that the CRT plays a critical role in providing positive opportunities for young people, not only locally but across the country, and that it deserves Government support?

Adam Jogee: My other constituency neighbour raises a very good point—

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): How many neighbours does my hon. Friend have?

Adam Jogee: I have seven neighbours—almost all Labour now, which is marvellous. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams) raises a powerful point and speaks to the CRT's reach up and down the country, not least in north Staffordshire.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab): I congratulate my good and hon. Friend on securing the debate, and echo the points that he is making. In my constituency of Easington in County Durham, the CRT works with 54 grassroots organisations, tackling health inequalities, and skills and employment challenges, in some of the most left-behind coalfield communities anywhere in the country. I echo the calls that have been made by my hon. Friend and other Labour colleagues to reinstate the national Government funding. I also point out respectfully to the Minister that there is huge support on the Labour Benches for that; almost 50 Labour MPs have signed early-day motion 965 in my name backing this modest but vital investment. I urge the Minister to recognise the depth of support for this proposal among coalfield Labour MPs.

Adam Jagee: I am grateful for that intervention from the dean of the coalfield communities. My hon. Friend works tirelessly on this issue and demonstrates by his leadership that it is one for all and all for one; I thank him for his work.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams) touched on “CRT game on”, which does a tremendous amount of work in Newcastle-under-Lyme as well as in Stoke-on-Trent North. I think in particular about what it is doing with our local club, Newcastle Town FC, where it plans to introduce free, weekly, structured turn-up-and-play football sessions for 11 to 18-year-olds in Knutton in the heart of Newcastle-under-Lyme, where the excellent Bayley Dickin is standing for Labour in the by-election on Thursday 1 May. I am sure that Labour colleagues will wish him well in that election. It will be the CRT that will provide the funding for the Newcastle Town coaches to deliver those sessions, and it will be the CRT that will enable young people in my constituency to access good-quality sport provision, no matter their background.

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend recognise the work that the CRT is doing in my constituency? Adjacent to the leafy suburbs that surround Glasgow there are coalfields, and those are the areas of deprivation. In particular, the CRT is doing work in Waterside to support the local community to re-establish the miners’ welfare, which fell into disrepair, as a new community hub, engaging all that work in the constituency and the supporters’ clubs to do that.

Adam Jagee: I thank my hon. Friend, who represents Cumbernauld—and the rest of her constituency—in Scotland: a great part of our United Kingdom. She raises a powerful yet basic point: the CRT does amazing work in all parts of our country. It is no surprise that the Whip on duty is my hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare (Gerald Jones), who similarly represents coalfield communities—I suspect that he would be speaking, were he allowed to.

I feel sure that the Minister, in his upcoming meeting with the CRT, will hear that it is seeking the reinstatement of UK Government support to enable it to keep doing what it does and to scale up its model with a proposal of capital investment of £50 million over a five-year period, equating obviously to £10 million a year. That would generate additional long-term sustainable funding of

£3.5 million to £4 million, which would be invested to benefit people living in coalfield communities such as mine. I support those calls.

Let us be clear: that is an ask not for grant funding but for investment in coalfield communities and in people like my constituents in Newcastle-under-Lyme. I know that it is one that will pay off. The CRT has proven time and again across 25 years that it is a wealth generator. Its community wealth building model has delivered growth in the coalfield communities that Labour members represent. With support from the Government, it will continue to do so.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab) *rose*—

Adam Jagee: I will happily give way to another Staffordshire colleague.

Josh Newbury: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way, particularly given that he is another Staffordshire MP. As he has heard me say before, the Museum of Cannock Chase in my constituency, which is primarily focused on mining heritage, is due to close by the end of the month. I am working hard alongside the Chase heritage group to rescue it. The Coalfields Regeneration Trust is taking an active interest in the effort. Does my hon. Friend agree that the CRT does fantastic work in preserving and celebrating our mining heritage?

Adam Jagee: As you can see, Madam Deputy Speaker, team Staffordshire hunt as a pack. My hon. Friend makes a good point.

The Government pride themselves on ensuring that the taxpayer gets the best value for money, and I, like all Labour Members, agree with that wholeheartedly. Every penny of the £50 million that we are asking for will be invested back into the service of working people. How much more positive could that be?

If the CRT was a stock, investors would be climbing over each other to buy it. But it is not a stock; it is a service set up by a Labour Government to provide a public good, and it is a service that the Government must support. The funding stream would be invested in the most deprived coalfield communities and the more than 900 grassroots organisations that the CRT currently works with, helping the Government to deliver their plan for neighbourhoods by creating safer, stronger and more prosperous communities.

This is the first Labour Government to have won an election since the Tories cut funding to the CRT—a Labour policy that the Conservatives scrapped. The Government have already shown that they will do the right thing by coalfield communities. They have already done work to address the injustice of the mineworkers’ pension scheme, and I hope that they will act on the British Coal staff superannuation scheme before too long.

Too many people in coalfield communities have lost faith in politics and our collective ability to do anything for them. After 15 years of being let down by consecutive Conservative Governments, who could blame them for thinking that way? This is an opportunity to show those people—our people—what Government can do. It is a time to show them that things can change.

The creation of the CRT by a Labour Government makes me proud. It is what Labour Governments are here to do—it is in our DNA. I accept that the Minister may not be able to make a financial announcement tonight, although he will be very welcome if he chooses to. Hon. Members will believe me when I say that I made the case to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, my right hon. Friend the Member for Bristol North West (Darren Jones), when he came to Newcastle-under-Lyme before Easter, but I hope the Minister will pass all our comments and interventions up to his ministerial colleagues.

By supporting the CRT in coalfield communities such as mine, this Government will continue to make me proud and, most importantly, will help me deliver for my constituents in Newcastle-under-Lyme and people living in coalfield communities up and down our United Kingdom.

10.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) for securing this debate and for raising not just the challenges faced by coalfield communities, but the exceptional work done by the Coalfields Regeneration Trust in supporting them.

I am always cautious. Indeed, when I was waiting for this debate I had a couple of emails from constituents, to which I replied that they should not measure the interest in Parliament always by the presence in Parliament. However, this is a rather exceptional turnout for an Adjournment debate at the end of the day. That shows the strength of feeling, and my hon. Friend has clearly picked an issue about which people feel strongly. He and other colleagues have made very thoughtful comments about the challenges facing our coalfield communities, what has worked to improve them and what might work in future.

My hon. Friend excellently set out the challenges facing communities such as his and mine. The history is well potted but I think it bears repeating. Just two years, 1985 and 1986, saw one third of pits close, including many where my constituents worked. By 1994, with the industry privatised, only 26 mines were operational out of more than 200 at the beginning of the '80s. Employment in coalmining plummeted to just 7,000 and the socioeconomic impact of those closures, especially at the community level, has been profound. It is important that we understand that in context: there are few, if any, more striking examples of chronic job loss in western Europe, with nearly all the burden carried by a few local areas and a specific segment of the workforce. That speaks to why we still have those challenges, which were felt then and which echo, in many cases for decades, down the generations, with coalfield communities facing poorer health outcomes, a shortage of quality jobs and social dislocation. As I say, I know that because it is my community too, and I feel the same strength and vigour as my colleagues about wanting to change that.

In seeking to address those challenges, we should be proud, as my hon. Friend said, that the previous Labour Government established the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, an independent charity designed to fund projects that would increase access to employment opportunities, education and skills training, and improve health and

wellbeing in communities, alongside developing enterprise. As colleagues have said, the results have been very good. My hon. Friend mentioned the former Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott—and boy, do we miss John. But you, Madam Deputy Speaker, will probably not thank me for also referring to another John, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey), who was instrumental in setting that up. As Parliament's leading Healey-ista, I can say that it is another example of him being proven right and the things that he has put in place having stood the test of time.

It is a testament to the organisation that when funding was ended in 2015 and there was a transition to £30 million of revenue funding and £22 million of capital funding, the CRT put that money to work, building industrial developments to support growing small and medium-sized enterprises and bringing economic growth to areas that had been experiencing market failure. Since 2015, the value of that original capital investment has doubled to create an asset base worth £55.5 million, supporting 3,500 jobs. On top of that, the rental income from those industrial developments provides a self-sustaining revenue stream to support coalfield communities, generating £21.5 million of revenue for the CRT and the more than 850 community organisations it works with in order to address the social and economic challenges facing their communities. As my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme said, the CRT's investment in 2023-24 alone helped 70,000 people tackle their health, skills and employment issues.

The case is very well made and I look forward to talking over this matter and the letter with Andy Lock and his colleagues. I can safely say, given that I think every person in this Chamber has written to me on this matter, that the case is very well made. As my hon. Friend hinted, I cannot run ahead of spending review plans, but I can assure him that the ideas are being taken very seriously because I know that the good people at CRT and the organisations they work with put their boots on every day to change their communities in a positive way, and we are very lucky to have them.

In the spirit of what my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) said, I want to mention the context in which we want the CRT to operate, and how we want it to change. I forget the three words that my hon. Friend used about power, but I think what I am about to say is very much in line with that. This Government, and the Prime Minister from day one, have promised a shift of power and resources from this place to local communities. These are proud communities. In my community we are proud that we powered the nation, and we are angry at the challenges we face. We have all the ideas and the insights we need to change it, but we just need the power and resources. That is the job of this Government. I could speak all day about what we are doing on devolution, but across our country, including in coalfield communities, and with more to come in Cumbria, Cheshire and Warrington, we are giving that power to local communities to help them shape their place.

There is also a place for localised placed-based funding interventions, and one that has aged particularly well—another John Prescott innovation—is the new deal for communities. We have started in that direction through our plan for neighbourhoods, which is a long-term commitment to communities to shift resources to them,

[Alex Norris]

and to give them that stability of long-term funding, backed by the support of central Government, and empowering them to take ownership of driving forward the renewal of their neighbourhood.

We are learning so much from what has worked, and the CRT will offer a great partnership with the coalfield communities who are the recipients of our plan for neighbourhoods. Those include 15 coalfield communities, including Mansfield, Doncaster, and Wrexham. As my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme rightly said, our hon. Friend the Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare (Gerald Jones), the Whip on duty, would be speaking for the people of Merthyr. He has been a terrific advocate for Merthyr and its plan for neighbourhoods. Those areas deserve that money and that support, and going forward we know that there needs to be greater support for coalfield communities across the country.

One way that we can ensure that the mistakes of the past four decades and the lack of opportunities for some coalfield communities can be changed is through local growth plans—time is short, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I do not want to miss this point. We have worked hard with the devolved Mayors to come up with plans for their economic future. My hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster Central (Sally Jameson) mentioned green industries and those huge opportunities, and I suspect we will see them as a feature of those plans. Our commitment to those communities is clear: they should come forward with their local growth plans, and we will ensure that in their aggregate they are linked through to an industrial strategy that changes the economy in this country.

I talk about the loss of jobs in my community in the '80s, and the great tragedy was the absolute absence of effort to replace them. It meant that a Labour Government had to come along many years later, and it meant that fantastic organisations such as the CRT had to pick up the pieces. Well, we will not do that. Our industrial strategy will be built on getting Britain building again, getting Britain making again, and on giving our proud communities the opportunities to again have the skilled labour that built them in the past and will build them again.

This debate is of course related to our past and our proud industrial heritage, but it is also a debate about the future—I know that because I feel I have perhaps the most intimidating group of people here to try to mug me for my dinner money on the way out, so it is very much in my future. The case has been exceptionally well made by my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme, and I thank him for doing so. The case has been made strongly by colleagues in interventions, in correspondence, and in an early-day motion—my hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) asks me every day about that, and his major criticism is that he thinks it is at least one zero short. I was surprised not to hear him say that, but I know colleagues will keep supporting that, and we will engage seriously with the CRT. We know how much it does and can do for our communities across the country, and I look forward to working with it in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

10.28 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 22 April 2025

[GRAHAM STUART *in the Chair*]

Residential Estate Management Companies

11.30 am

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered residential estate management companies.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for listing this debate. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. It is good to see so many MPs back straight after the Easter break, ready to get stuck into the gritty issue of residential estate management companies, whose poor business practices have affected so many of our constituents. In that spirit, I come here today to address the Minister and to call for urgency from the Government in dealing with some serious issues, and for more regulation and new legislation.

The issues raised repeatedly by constituents cause not just frustration, but in some cases serious distress. They cost significant amounts of money and sometimes lead to the loss of the entire value of a property investment at the point of resale. The situation for both leaseholders and freeholders has become so bad that such estates are now commonly referred to as “fleecehold” instead of leasehold. We note that the Government’s White Paper on leasehold reform, published last month, said that their legislation will make conversion to commonhold easier, but we feel that that will not go far enough. We look forward to seeing the legislation laid before the House. The previous Secretary of State—then the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities—said that he was a “man in a hurry” to liberate leaseholders from unfair practices. He clearly was not in quite enough of a hurry, so I urge haste on the current Secretary of State.

The Liberal Democrats have long called for reform for the 4.8 million existing leasehold properties in England. In fact, it has been a campaign of ours since Lloyd George introduced the people’s Budget in 1909. We will keep going until we see some change. We want leasehold tenures abolished for all properties, including flats, and we want all existing leaseholds converted into either freeholds or, where appropriate, commonholds. We are disappointed that existing leaseholders are not covered by the Government’s proposals and we urge a rethink.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. To add to the point she is making, is she not shocked by the scale of what we are seeing across the country? Of the new homes built in 2021–22 by the 11 largest developers, 80% are subject to fleecehold.

Caroline Voaden: Yes, I absolutely agree. I will come on to that a little later.

To get back to the core issue of estate management companies, every type of resident—leaseholders and freeholders—is affected by rogue practices. Perversely,

the situation is often more difficult for freeholders, who do not have the same statutory rights as leaseholders to take challenges to a first-tier tribunal. Where the landlord of an estate is a housing association, no one has any right to go to tribunal if that landlord fails to manage the property properly. That, too, needs to be looked at, but it falls outside the scope of today’s debate.

Whichever way we look at it, residents—whether housing association tenants, private tenants, owner-occupiers or retirees, living in a house or a flat—are being ignored, dismissed, intimidated and, frankly, fleeced by management companies that are not subject to any kind of regulation. We have all seen what happened in the water industry when private operators were allowed to focus solely on the profit line, ignoring their responsibilities to the environment while keeping shareholders happy. I believe we are looking at the next great scandal of our time: companies that may be owned by a shadowy collection of overseas investors eating up the smaller players in the UK market, building up their wealth and size so that they can ride roughshod over anyone who is tenacious enough to question their methods or ask for legitimate explanations of where their money has gone.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): Across my constituency, from the largest developments with more than 1,000 homes to the smallest with just a dozen homes, residents are benighted by the lack of transparency of those who run the management companies. Does my hon. Friend agree that a great step forward would be for the Government to insist on the timely publication of itemised accounts, so it is much clearer to residents how their money is allegedly being spent on their behalf by the management companies?

Caroline Voaden: I absolutely agree and will come on to that as well.

As a new MP coming into this place, I realised that some issues would be pertinent only to my constituency and others would reflect similar casework elsewhere, but when I reached out to colleagues to see who else was dealing with casework about estate management and particularly FirstPort, I was shocked at the response I got. At least half my hon. Friends on the Liberal Democrat Benches are supporting residents whose properties and estates are managed by FirstPort, and a dozen of us were in the room to question managing director Martin King when he responded to our invitation and came to Parliament to answer some of our more urgent questions. Following our invitation, he was also invited by Labour and Conservative MPs. He must feel very popular with so many invitations to Parliament, but it is rather a reflection of the desperation of so many of our constituents, who have exhausted all other avenues to raise complaints with FirstPort.

Martin King’s company manages more than 310,000 homes across England, Wales and Scotland, so we are talking about at least half a million people dealing with just this one company. It is extremely disappointing to report that since the Lib Dem meeting, at which great things were promised, the only response we have received from the south-west regional operations director for the company has been one automatic email reply. It is not good enough.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): It is the same experience for residents, is it not? When MPs ask questions of FirstPort, we do not get any replies. People turn up, smile and say nice words—soothing things—but nothing happens. The residents get the same thing. That includes a 94-year-old woman whose daughter contacted me to say that she was refused a request to install a stairlift and she cannot sell the property, because the management fees that FirstPort charges are so high, so she is effectively trapped, unable to get up and down the stairs. Is that not a disgrace and does it not go to show that FirstPort just doesn't give a damn?

Caroline Voaden: I agree that it is an absolute disgrace. We must have some kind of legislation to bring these companies to book.

In the UK, we have a rather strange situation whereby a new housing estate is built, but the council may not adopt the new area, so the builder has responsibility for roads, green spaces and communal areas and then passes that on to a third-party management company. Residents end up paying council tax on the one hand and estate management fees on the other. These charges can increase at any time, with no accountability or redress.

The Competition and Markets Authority has recommended ending the private estates model, which has been used for 40% of all new builds across Britain in the last five years, and potentially more, as the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) said. The CMA has recommended mandatory adoption by local councils of public amenities on new housing estates. Even when roads are accessible to the general public and green spaces can be enjoyed or used by anyone, residents can end up being responsible for their upkeep through service charges. The tenants of such developments pay both council tax and an estate management charge, yet they often receive a far worse service than those who live in adopted developments and are subject only to council tax, so I urge the Minister to consider ending the practice of shared ownership of public spaces for the vast majority of new developments. I would like to see a presumption that the shared areas around new developments are almost always adopted by the local authority where the development is standard in nature.

Ahead of this debate, I asked the House of Commons Library to engage with people who had signed relevant petitions. More than 1,100 people responded, one third of whom were freeholders. Ninety-four per cent said they were unhappy or very unhappy with the services provided by their management company; 94% said the service charges were unfair; and 94% said the transparency of what the service charges were for was completely inadequate.

Olivia Bailey (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): My constituents living in Beansheaf Grange and Fairfields, to name just two developments in my constituency, recognise much of what the hon. Lady is saying. They tell me about high fees, poor service and uncleared rubbish, even leading to marauding rats. Will she join me in welcoming the firm action that this Government are taking to be in a hurry to address this deep unfairness?

Caroline Voaden: I am glad that the hon. Lady says that the Government are in a hurry. We are looking forward to seeing the legislation come before the House.

Out of the 1,100 people to whom I was referring, only 10 were happy with the way things were going with their management company. By anyone's measure, that is a pretty shocking state of affairs. Respondents talked of shoddy workmanship, years of delays in getting repairs done, charges for gardening where no gardens exist, charges for new windows when windows are not replaced, charges for buildings insurance when there are no communal buildings, charges for new light bulbs when there is no communal lighting—it would be funny if it were not so serious. They talked of broken lifts, flooded car parks, leaking ceilings, including one that has been leaking for nine years, exorbitant insurance charges—the list goes on and on.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): One other aspect worthy of scrutiny is the situation whereby a developer sets up a management company made up of family members of the original developer, leaving residents with a real challenge to get to the heart of who is truly accountable. That is something that I have seen in my constituency, and I am sure that it happens across the country. It is something that the Government need to address in whatever they come forward with.

Caroline Voaden: The right hon. Member raises a very good point. The ownership of some of these companies is murky to say the least.

Service charges are going up way beyond inflation, with no clear explanation of what the increases are for, and management companies refuse to give clear explanations when asked. At Camomile Lawn in Totnes in my constituency, residents were told that the annual contribution to a reserve fund had been increased from £2,000 to £8,000 a year—over 265%. Service charges were raised 23% based on a 10-year plan, but the plan was not shared with the residents, even when they asked. Accounting costs went up 55% in one year with no explanation given. This is a classic example of poor communication and a refusal to engage constructively with residents who want to understand the basis on which financial decisions are made.

The lack of transparency around service charges has been debated in this House many times, not least in December 2023 on Second Reading of the Bill that became the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024. It is way past time that management companies were required to act responsibly, treat residents with respect and provide timely, straightforward and accessible information to all residents, regardless of their status as leaseholders or freeholders, and regardless of age.

One resident said:

“We feel like we are being taken advantage of because they see us as old.”

That is a common reflection of those living in retirement villages. Too often, questions go unanswered, letters and phone calls are ignored, and justifiable requests for clarity and information on charges get rebuffed or given such poor responses that they do not mean anything. A delay in bill payment caused by asking a legitimate question often leads to a penalty charge for late payment—a sharp practice that clearly has to end. What is more, people are being forced to pay for the privilege of having asked those questions. One respondent said:

"I received a bill of more than £2,000 for incurring charges trying to see where my money was being spent—£25 per email, £35 per phone call and solicitor charges on top. I felt completely robbed."

Older people often feel bullied by management companies—scared to question charges, confused by badly written statements and threatened with legal action if they are late paying charges because of wanting to question something. One resident said:

"Our management company leverage their familiarity with legal processes and the vast financial resources at their disposal to bully and intimidate leaseholders."

This is not just about money; it is about how people feel living in a home that they may have put their life savings into buying. These homes are often sold as offering peace of mind, but one respondent said:

"I'm drained, scared and mentally exhausted. It feels like I'm being financially and emotionally worn down for simply asking for basic transparency and fairness."

Another said:

"My mental health has been seriously impacted by the state of our building. No one should be unhappy in their home or feel like they don't want to go home."

When it comes time to sell, it is yet another tale of woe. Management companies do not respond to requests for information from solicitors; sellers are charged thousands of pounds for management packs that are required for the sale but take months to arrive; buyers get frustrated and pull out, and the price of the property is impacted. Meanwhile, service charges keep rising and ground rents keep being charged.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) said, people are trapped in their properties. Service charges can make it impossible to sell, as they have risen way beyond those charged on new properties in the same area. Dr Janet Richardson's father bought a flat for £106,000 in 2006. In 2022, he had to move into a care home and she tried to sell the flat. Some months after putting it on the market she received an offer for £10,000 below the purchase price, which she accepted, but for months FirstPort did not answer requests for information, so eventually the buyer pulled out. The flat went back on the market at an even lower price, but still has not sold, three years after first being put on the market. Dr Richardson has now had to agree to sell the property through an assured buyer scheme and says there is likely to be nothing left once all the debts have been paid. She has shown me the figures—it has all gone. If FirstPort had done its job properly she would probably have sold the flat for a reasonable amount two years ago, but of course there is no offer of compensation from FirstPort.

Finally, I come to the nightmare scenario that people face if they dare to attempt to get rid of FirstPort as the management company. Resident groups that have made repeated attempts to release themselves from FirstPort's management have met resistance and obfuscation, forcing them to retain lawyers and pushing legal fees into the tens of thousands. Those cases have taken an emotional toll on residents, many of whom are elderly. One case in my constituency has been going on for three years and is still not resolved.

South-west based Baker Estates has sacked FirstPort from a new estate at Dartington because of non-performance. The Duchy of Cornwall also sacked the company at the vast Nansledan estate in Newquay. It is

more than clear that these companies are not doing their job. Their *raison d'être* is clearly not that of operating in the best interests of their residents. Estate management companies have had it too good for too long.

As we look again in this place at leasehold properties, we must also look at the difficult situation for freeholders on privately managed estates. We need to bring forward leasehold reform as soon as possible. Does the Minister have a timeline for introducing the leasehold and commonhold reform Bill? Will the Government bring forward legislation to allow freeholders to challenge management charges and to take over the management of a development if they wish?

Have the Government considered greater regulation of estate management companies, such as through an ombudsman, so that residents have some recourse when they encounter problems? If not, will they consider doing so? Will they introduce legislation to prevent management companies from charging residents for legal costs when they ask legitimate questions? Will they introduce legislation to professionalise the management of estates and buildings, with a basic level of service required and a mechanism for complaint and escalation that is easily accessible to residents? I look forward to the Minister's response. I now leave it to other hon. Members to share experiences of the freehold nightmare.

Several hon. Members rose—

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): I do not need to remind Members to bob if they wish to be called in the debate. We are busily counting how many there are. To get everybody in would effectively allow a little more than two minutes each. I do not want to go below that, because it becomes a bit meaningless. We will try to keep everything short, and it would help if interventions were minimised.

11.46 am

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for securing this debate. Since I first wrote on social media asking my constituents whether they had been affected by freehold, I have had hundreds of messages, showing how much of a problem this is across the country. The way we build, own and manage homes these days has become incredibly complex. It is frustratingly difficult to unravel it, or to hold anyone to account.

I spent Tuesday taking officers from FirstPort around the Cornish properties that the company manages. It gave the residents a good chance to ask questions about repairs that had not been done and service charges that they felt were not transparent. The officers dealt with queries openly and constructively. However, it is frustrating that it took my intervention for that to happen.

On Wednesday, I visited a relatively new estate in a village in the middle of the constituency, to look at—among other things—broken drains. The drains were not made to withstand cars driving over them, yet they are used in parking bays. The gully does not drain and is blocked. Neither the builder, freehold owner, managing agent, housing provider nor council has accepted responsibility.

Adoption is an issue. One resident I met had been living on the estate for 13 years. The developer, Persimmon, finished the estate in 2012 but, as I understand it,

[Jayne Kirkham]

because the school included in the plans was not finished, the estate is regarded as unfinished. The developer continues to own the roads and some green spaces, and remains the residents' managing company. Residents are stuck in limbo, unable to take on the freehold ownership, and have no control over the managing agents. Residents have spoken to me about yearly service charge increases, ranging from 16% to 30%. They get a letter from the managing agent with a breakdown of costs, which are very general, lacking any explanation of why they are going up.

Procurement is also an issue. Residents of an estate in Truro were charged more than £12,000 in advance of felling a tree. That was the only quote obtained at the time and was added to residents' bills as the maximum they could expect to pay, with the difference to be refunded in following years. That still has not happened, although that occurred about three years ago. Communication is a real issue: emails regularly go unanswered, property managers are unavailable or uncontactable, and owners' meetings have not been held.

I would like to end by quoting one of my constituents, who lives in a freehold property:

"Overall it's their lack of engagement and their attitude towards us that annoys many. They do what they want and charge us what they like and we simply have to pay up. There's no regulation and virtually no way residents can complain...other than a potentially complex and expensive legal process."

I am hopeful that this environment will begin to change with the implementation of the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024 and the introduction of the leasehold and commonhold reform Bill. The Government are committed to ending the unjust practice of freehold and will hopefully consult this year on how to reduce the prevalence of private estate management arrangements. I am sure that will be welcomed by my constituents and others across the country.

11.49 am

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) on securing this debate. I want to give the House a message of hope. FirstPort was responsible for Lendy Place, a development in Sunbury in my Spelthorne constituency some 10 minutes' walk from where I live. I was contacted by Mr Saponaro, who set up the residents association there. The usual FirstPort management company rap sheet was at play there, with a constant change of account managers, service charge hikes, substandard accountancy and depletion of funds. The company was even at one stage proposing to charge an additional £40,000 to accommodate post-Grenfell regulations. When it was pointed out that Lendy Place was only three storeys high so those regulations did not apply, FirstPort simply said, "Whoops, sorry, we overlooked that," and the bill went away.

The residents of Lendy Place were so disappointed with FirstPort's performance that they did what the hon. Member for South Devon suggested, which can be a very tortuous process, and removed FirstPort as the managing agent. The residents are very happy with the new managing agent company, which, if I had texted a lot quicker, I would have a name for. I am meeting the residents of Lendy Place shortly and I look forward to reporting back to the House and similar forums how

they went through the process of removing FirstPort. I can tell hon. Members with amazing tales of woe around this Chamber that there is hope. It can be done. With hon. Members' support and no doubt their tenaciousness, Members' residents can in future remove substandard management companies from their role.

11.52 am

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I thank the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for securing this debate. The Government face many issues as a result of the unholy alliance between weak regulation, private sector greed and the long-term underfunding of local government. We have here a particularly egregious example. Others have spoken, and will continue to speak about the business practices involved in the sector. I want to focus on how we have allowed a system to develop where service charges, and therefore residential estate management companies, are being used inappropriately.

In some parts of the country people pay twice for the same basic services—once for their own and once for everyone else's. There is an appropriate use of service charging for lifts, common areas and genuinely private outdoor spaces, but it should not be used for sewerage, most highways and the vast majority of play areas and open spaces. It is not uncommon to see a report to the council's planning committee that says something like, "The council would not wish to take on the inspection and management of these areas." We know why councils do that, but it must end and the Government need to act accordingly.

My ask to the Minister is simple. The Government should implement section 42 of the Flood and Water Management Act 2010 to require utility adoption for new developments; create an equivalent for highways adoption; and direct councils that the default for publicly accessible spaces is that they are maintained publicly, whether that is by the principal authority or by the town and parish council.

11.53 am

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. Residents in Mid Sussex continue to fall victim to sky-high management fees and poor customer experience on a grand scale by companies such as McCarthy Stone and FirstPort. We need good quality homes for people to live in. We need them for first-time buyers, for growing families and for older people looking to downsize.

Those looking for suitable housing in their later years in Mid Sussex often look to flats run by McCarthy Stone. Sadly, many of them and their families are being badly let down. Perhaps the most shocking example involves a constituent of mine in Corbett Court in Burgess Hill, where McCarthy Stone charges up to £14,000 a year as standard. An elderly Corbett Court resident was charged £8.54 for an on-site staff member to come to their flat and pick up a remote control.

People in all stages of their life are finding themselves living on estates run by management companies like FirstPort. Constituents from Hassocks to Lindfield have written to me, setting out a raft of issues that residents are facing. FirstPort refused itemised breakdowns of fees despite huge increases, and in one instance a constituent

was told that they had been incorrectly charged and were immediately told to pay £575 within three weeks—clearly a totally unreasonable timeframe, not least because the mistake had been made by FirstPort. All of that while residents tell me, “FirstPort’s communication has been non-existent and they are not completing their duties.”

People have been through enough. If we want to successfully and sustainably grow our housing offer for future generations—young and old—something needs to change.

11.55 am

Sadik Al-Hassan (North Somerset) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stuart. I declare an interest in that I own a flat in Liverpool that is currently managed by FirstPort, and I have personally been affected by many of the issues that my constituents have written to me about in recent months. Like many in leasehold flats in Portishead in my constituency, I purchased my first ever dream home off-plan. I am sad to say that that dream has become a nightmare, as it has for so many.

Since coming into office nine months ago, I have been in contact with hundreds of constituents throughout North Somerset who have seen the realisation of long-held aspirations of home ownership turn into a slog to defend their rights against encroaching mega-corporations intent on squeezing every penny possible from ordinary, hard-working people. From those conversations, it has become clear to me that estate management companies are rip-offs; they utilise every legal means at their disposal to squeeze leaseholders out of every last penny they can. By using a complex web of separate legal entities, they can facilitate an intricate trickery, designed to pull the wool over honest homeowners’ eyes to ruin their quiet enjoyment.

To give credit where it is due, the Building Safety Act 2022 was most certainly a step in the right direction, making it clear when and where financial obligations would be laid at the door of freeholders. I am sad to report that in the years since, we have seen freeholders, aided by estate management companies, do everything in their power to delay and resist. It is nothing short of scandalous. I look forward to the inevitable ITV drama that we will one day see, and which will finally prompt sufficient action to bring this sad chapter in our nation’s history to an end.

I could easily stand here and recount for hours the innumerable injustices suffered from estate management companies by constituents throughout North Somerset, but I recognise that my time is limited, so I wish to focus on the pair of buildings only a few minutes’ walk from my constituency office in Portishead, Ninety4 on the Estuary and 110 @ The Quay. After years of dragging their heels, it finally took the residents’ plight reaching regional news to shame the freeholder and developer into agreeing to shoulder the cost. However, since then residents have been subject to an unending stream of additional costs and excessive service fee increases, seemingly as the aforementioned entities try to recoup losses.

With another delay always around the corner, understandably so many of our constituents feel that the system is no longer capable of serving their interests and needs to end. Leaseholders in these buildings feel stuck in this battle, which has been raging for years now, and have felt powerless and trapped, unable to find

buyers despite offering significantly under market value. Similarly, potential buyers have struggled to obtain mortgages due to uncertainty over cladding issues, with a deep sense descending on residents of the twin buildings that they may never truly escape the nightmare that they have found themselves in.

Hundreds of constituents, not just in those buildings but in dozens of similar situations across North Somerset, have asked me for help in finally bringing this shameful situation to an end. That is why I am thankful to the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for securing this important debate. I look forward to seeing what remedies the Minister has in store in the upcoming leasehold and commonhold reform Bill, which I understand will be introduced to Parliament later this year.

11.58 am

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for securing this important debate.

I purchased my home in 2017. By the time I surrendered a deposit of several thousand pounds, which had taken me a decade to accrue, I had already engaged with a financial adviser, secured a mortgage in principle and researched my eligibility for a Government equity loan. I had already picked the carpets by the time I was told to sign an estate management contract. The concept was completely alien to me; it was explained that on top of my council tax—paid to a local authority to maintain my public services—I would now pay a private company to maintain certain other things around the development. If I declined, I was not allowed to buy a home. It felt a lot like blackmail. It is worse than I realised at the time; the private company is entirely unregulated and it can, and does, charge me and fellow residents whatever it wants for services. Residents can, and often do, see their annual bills rise severalfold.

In serving her local residents, the excellent local councillor Sarah Hands for the Innsworth ward can regularly be found mediating an abdication of responsibility between Persimmon Homes—it still has not passed the estate on to the local authority almost a decade after moving offsite—the local authority, Severn Trent Water and the estate management company. FirstPort is so notoriously difficult to even find a point of contact for that residents give up and then Sarah Hands gets it in the neck instead.

I echo the requests made by the hon. Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper). The restructuring of local government gives us an opportunity to end this scam, return estates and services to the local authorities, and outlaw the practice of signing these contracts at the point of house purchase.

12 noon

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): In their interactions with management companies, my constituents feel done to, shut out, left behind and ignored. It feels like my constituents are hearing one message—“You don’t matter”—but my constituents do matter, and I want to represent some of them in this debate; sadly, time will not allow me to mention them all.

Two of my constituents live in two separate properties in Bournemouth East. They have been defrauded by Initiative Property Management, the sudden collapse of

[Tom Hayes]

which left leaseholders with depleted reserve funds and significantly out of pocket. One leaseholder estimates that they have lost £80,000 and that they and the other residents in their block have lost around £1,200 per flat per year. Another estimates a total loss from fraud at around £10 million. A serious fraud investigation is under way.

Another constituent has suffered at the hands of the management company Scanlans Ltd, which has asked for £5,000 a year from them and other residents but has done nothing to maintain the garden and communal areas. At one point, a dead rat was left in the communal area for months. Scanlans is now in ongoing communication over plans to address those issues, but no clear action has yet been taken.

Another constituent has had to deal with Residential Management Group. RMG refused to deal with a rat infestation, and left the door to the communal area unsecured, with homeless people breaking in to sleep there. The case has been taken up with RMG and is ongoing. The themes that many of us will discuss today are common: excessive and unjustified service charge increases, a lack of transparency and financial accountability, poor communication if any at all, and poor building maintenance and unresolved issues. Enough is enough.

I want my constituents who are watching, feeling let down and having been left out of pocket by unacceptable conduct, to know that as their MP I will continue to fight on their behalf and alongside them for justice. I will continue to work to ensure that nobody else has to suffer the hardships, anguish and abuse that they have suffered. We are fighting this together. We are making progress, and I am pleased that the Government are in a hurry to address this important issue.

12.2 pm

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I commend the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for securing and leading this important debate. Many Members are aware of the efforts to change the law and raise the profile of the fleecehold campaign by the Home Owners Rights Network. HORNET has revealed that 960 sites across the UK are affected by this practice, with a staggering 213,000 homeowners affected.

I want to touch on the fantastic local work being done in my constituency of Bridlington and The Wolds. I pay particular tribute to the great work being carried out by the Wolds View action group, which is based on the Bellway estate in Driffield in my constituency, led by Dr Jenny Shaw and the residents of the Wolds View estate. Another affected development, the Mortimer Park estate, which is also in Driffield and was developed by Barratt Homes, consists of 165 properties, with another 120 being built. Those are just two local examples I am aware of, but there are others in my constituency in Market Weighton, Hornsea and Bridlington.

To echo the stories we have heard in this debate, many residents feel that they were not told adequately at the time of purchase about what was to come in terms of estate management. Many feel they face the double whammy of estate management costs and their

council tax payments. Further to what the Minister has set out in the House in recent months, I urge him to adopt the Competition and Markets Authority's 2024 recommendations as a matter of urgency to ensure common adoptable standards, and to mandate the adoption of public amenities on new housing estates.

However, we must not leave existing homeowners in limbo. Residents such as my constituents at Wolds View and Mortimer Park deserve equal protection. I would appreciate the Minister clarifying in his closing remarks what specific protections will be extended to the 200,000 homeowners currently affected. Let us be clear: they are freehold residents who own their own homes. The language used by the Government when discussing this issue has been, on occasion, particularly disappointing, and needs to be clearer when separating the issues of freehold and leasehold. My constituents are not leaseholders in this instance, and it would reassure them if the Minister would outline how the Government intend to address this specific area.

I am grateful for the opportunity to raise these concerns on behalf of my constituents. It is not a local problem; it is a national issue that needs swift and decisive action from this Government.

12.5 pm

Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stuart. I thank the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for securing this important debate. This issue comes up time and again in my postbag, particularly from residents in Wymondham town in South Norfolk.

My constituents have raised three clear and pressing concerns, which I hope the Minister will be able to address in his closing remarks. First, there is a glaring lack of accountability and transparency when it comes to estate management companies. Residents are often left with no clear route to challenge fees or demand better services. At a time when every penny counts, we cannot allow these companies to make up charges on a whim and profiteer at the expense of hard-working families.

Secondly, there is no effective legislation compelling developers to hand over services and responsibilities in a timely and orderly fashion, resulting in confusion, inconsistency, and, in many cases, residents caught in limbo. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, residents on these estates are paying twice: once through council tax, and again through ever-increasing estate management fees. In return, they often receive a poorer level of service than their neighbours who do not live on managed estates.

I recently sat down with Kevin, a constituent who lives on a Persimmon estate in Wymondham. Like many others, Kevin's experience has been frustrating and, frankly, unacceptable. Some services on his estate have been adopted; others have not. The local highways remain unadopted, and the water and sewage infrastructure is still being managed by a private management company, because Anglian Water has not yet adopted it. Kevin and his neighbours are left paying for a system that does not work properly, and they are rightly asking: why? I want to put Kevin's question directly to the Minister: why can developers not be made responsible for the upkeep of estates until full adoption by the relevant authorities is complete?

This is not just a question of regulation but a matter of fairness. If we believe in levelling up and supporting our families in every part of the country, we must act to ensure that residents are treated with respect, and to give them the services they pay for. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): If colleagues are able to speak for 90 seconds, that will be tremendous.

12.7 pm

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for leading this important debate.

For far too long, management companies have operated in a vacuum of regulation, and communities are paying the price. Residents find themselves locked into contracts with no flexibility in payment, and often no cap on the service charges imposed. There is also a lack of transparency, without proper itemised charges being made available to residents, and a lack of communication and engagement with residents about how the companies are adhering to agreed management plans.

This is not just unfair but a recipe for disaster, and it is contributing to yet another housing crisis. Residents in social housing—many housed by the local authority—are not able to keep up with hikes on service charges. Homeowners who want to sell their homes are finding it difficult to do so because of uncapped service charges. These companies are unaccountable, and there is no regulation to stop charges being raised unreasonably, or a service being withdrawn without explanation.

Often the service that residents receive is below standard or non-existent. One of my constituents now pays more to FirstPort in service charges than on her own mortgage. FirstPort takes a 5% fee for major works such as roofing, redecorating and carpeting communal areas, which is abhorrent. If we need to have maintenance companies, then residents should be able to shop around for better deals, and the right to manage should be an easy process for both leaseholders and freeholders.

Furthermore, we see major issues with sustainable urban drainage systems and unadopted roads—infrastructure that is often left unfinished or below standard when developers walk away with no clarity on who is responsible. In some cases, we have even seen roads constructed below adoptable standards, or taking many years to be adopted. Residents are paying service charges, on top of their council tax, for drainage and roads that will never be adopted.

The Competition and Markets Authority recommended that those problems be addressed, but to date that recommendation has not been implemented. Will the Government commit to implementing the CMA's proposals? I also urge them to consider retrospective powers for councils to intervene where such arrangements are clearly exploitative and unsustainable. At present, local authorities have no power to undo agreements that are already in place.

This issue requires national leadership and statutory oversight. The Government must regulate estate management companies and ensure that residents are not left powerless or trapped in the place they call home.

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): I call the ever-succinct Rupa Huq.

12.10 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Stuart. Residential estate management companies are middlemen who sort things out per the lease—or notorious scammers, as our constituents call them. A few weeks ago, residents in Western Circus in east Acton were left without running water—a basic human right—between Friday and Wednesday, so for nearly a week they could not flush the loo, change babies' bottles, wash their hands or brush their chops. Who was the managing agent? The notorious FirstPort—a word that strikes fear into every MP's heart. It did not contact residents for over 24 hours.

The building is a new build—I remember going to the topping out ceremony in my hard hat and high-viz jacket. Those 329 flats with 400 residents were left without running water, and for 24 hours they were in complete limbo. When the company finally made contact, it was very half-arsed—sorry, that is not parliamentary language. I was on a Zoom call with residents, and it was very “Computer says no.” There was a reluctance to do anything about it, and I think that is shocking.

People have talked about fleecehold. I have talked to many FirstPort victims: just the other day at my advice surgery, I spoke to a grieving father trying to sort out his son's estate. He found all these unexpected charges, because FirstPort hoovers up ground rent and then springs all these nasties on people.

Leasehold covers millions of dwellings and is particularly common in London. Reports from the CMA, the Resolution Foundation and Which? have found that people are disempowered and are charged unexpected, unfair fees. People are losing money hand over fist—for what? We do not know exactly.

I think my 90 seconds will end any second, so let me just say that MPs and the Facebook group have been decisive, but it is not good enough. We need proper action, so I am glad the Government will introduce a new commonhold tenure to end the neo-feudal tenure of leasehold, which has been there too long. Western Circus is being run by clowns—it needs to stop.

12.12 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Stuart. It is plain from what others have said that this is a sector-wide problem. In 2017, Sajid Javid, when he was the Secretary of State, set up the regulation of property agents working group, under Lord Best. When it reported in 2019, it recommended

“a model for an independent property agent regulator” and

“a single, mandatory and legally-enforceable Code of Practice for property agents”.

The Government would do well to follow that advice.

I want to refer to the constituency case of Cathy Gardner, a resident of Sidmouth. Since 2017, her insurance premiums payable to Blue Cedar Homes management company have risen from about £100 a year to as much as £900 because she is being charged for every single eventuality, including terrorism. Now, we do not have a great deal of terrorism on the retirement estates of

[Richard Foord]

mid and east Devon, so I can be certain that a large cut is being taken out of that fee. We need transparency so we can all know why that is happening and where that money is going.

12.14 pm

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stuart. I thank the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for securing the debate.

My constituents at Vickers Green in Crayford have experienced similar problems to other constituents. The Conservative council granted their Barratt Homes development, consisting of 247 homes, planning permission in 2009. The local planning committee's report confirms that management of

"the estate roads, the communal areas, the play facility, the ecological area, the open space area etc"

will technically be the responsibility of the homeowners. It also confirms that the construction and maintenance of internal roads and parking areas, although not carried out by the council, will need to be carried out "to the Council's satisfaction." That has caused real problems for my constituents, who are paying their council tax but also having to pay charges for these things.

More recently, my constituents found that FirstPort is their management agent. This year it informed them that there was a £44,000 overspend in 2022, which they are now expected to pick up, in 2025. One constituent was told they had to pay charges for the two months before they moved into their property. Many residents have also seen the £600 charge for picking up responsibility for the communal areas and roads more than double in recent years, and they feel there is a gross unfairness in that.

I therefore welcome the Government's planned changes. I would also welcome comments from my hon. Friend the Minister about what the Government propose to do to protect leaseholders from the kinds of abuse and poor service they have experienced, and about how some of these communal areas, which would traditionally be maintained by local authorities, might be returned to them, rather than being the responsibility of FirstPort, and therefore of homeowners themselves.

12.16 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stuart. I commend the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for setting the scene so well.

I recently met one of the management companies in my local area, where residents had lodged a list of queries after their management fees went up by a substantial amount. They asked where the money had gone. It is difficult to see why fences still need painting when there is a bill for paint, and it is hard to understand why there is a bill for the upkeep of a sign that does not appear to have been cleaned in years. The difficulty with these companies is that, with no regulation of them, residents feel they are being done over.

It might be best if I quote one of my constituents and then offer a solution. My constituent said:

"I am writing as a resident to express serious concerns regarding the management of communal land. Like many homeowners across the UK, I am facing high and increasing charges for substandard maintenance, with no option to switch providers.

The company operates a monopoly in many estates, charging fees that are neither transparent nor fairly regulated. Residents are often left with poorly maintained green spaces despite paying substantial fees. Furthermore, there is no option for estates to collectively choose a different management company, leaving homeowners effectively trapped in an unfair system. I am asking for your support."

She is asking me for my support, and I am asking the Minister to address this issue.

The solution my constituent suggests is introducing "a cap on the fees that land management companies like Greenbelt can charge homeowners"

and creating

"a legal mechanism that allows estates to vote on who manages their communal land, giving residents the freedom to choose better service providers."

She finishes by saying:

"Many homeowners across the UK are affected by this, and I believe it is an issue that requires government action."

I look to the Minister to ensure that we address this issue UK-wide, and not simply in England and Wales. Residents across the United Kingdom face the same problems as residents in Strangford, and they must be addressed.

12.18 pm

Mrs Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I thank the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for securing this important debate.

My constituents are being treated as a cash cow. There are managing agents causing a problem across my entire constituency, and I have casework in Alsager, Congleton, Sandbach and Holmes Chapel. I do not have time to go into every one of those items, but the worst—the hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) referred to this—relates to insurance charges for terrorism. I am not flippant about terrorism, but retirement properties in Alsager are unlikely to be victims of it.

The retirement community in Alsager received a £14,000 bill for electricity in communal areas, where there were approximately three lights. Residents challenged that bill, which suddenly became £7,000, with no explanation as to why it had halved or why it had been £14,000 in the first place. They challenged it again, but they still do not have a proper breakdown as to why so few lights cost so much money—they simply cannot get that information. As others have mentioned, when people challenge bills, they get charged again and again.

There is an absolute lack of transparency about these organisations and about transactions, including where insurance is being bought from connected parties. There is a real question about whether corporate governance as it stands is fundamentally capable of addressing some of these issues.

I absolutely second the calls by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper) for the adoption of section 42 of the Flood and Water Management Act 2010, the creation of an equivalent for roads, and the requirement for play areas and public areas to be adopted by local authorities.

I am worried that the charges my constituents see are just the beginning and that, as their estates age, those charges are likely to become significantly larger, particularly in unadopted areas. Will the Minister please confirm what we can do about these many issues?

12.20 pm

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for her excellent and comprehensive speech, as well as for securing the debate.

My constituency of Didcot and Wantage in Oxfordshire has seen enormous population growth. New estates affected by these issues include Highcroft and Winterbrook Meadows in Wallingford, Fuller's Grove and Hamilton Drive in East Challow, Dida Gardens and Great Western Park in Didcot, Kingsgrove in Wantage, and Cholsey Meadows. With 30,000 more homes planned in the surrounding area by 2041, the issue will clearly not go away.

Companies that have caused some of the issues that have come across my desk include not only FirstPort, but RMG, Remus and Home Group. My residents have experienced many of the issues mentioned by hon. Members, including arguments and a lack of accountability regarding responsibility for maintenance issues, a lack of transparency around fees and a lack of ability to influence management companies. As my hon. Friend the Member for Tewkesbury (Cameron Thomas) highlighted, the details of the fees and charges that will apply are sometimes revealed only towards the end of the purchase process, and are mysteriously absent from the pretty brochures that promote such sales.

I have seen examples of residents valiantly taking on estate management companies—for example, Home Group in Mersey Way and Venners Water, in Didcot—and securing far more reasonable charges than those originally proposed. However, that needs to be made simpler, so that residents in Springfield Way, in Sutton Courtenay, and on the Dovecote estate, in Drayton, can build on that excellent experience. We clearly need a lot more regulation because the market has failed in this area.

12.21 pm

Nesil Caliskan (Barking) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. My constituents tell me over and over again about the poor performance and lack of accountability of residential estate management companies. In this country, the truth is that there is a complex web of operating companies, parent companies and, in some cases, companies registered in offshore tax havens, with no individuals to hold to account. It should not be like that, and it does not have to be like that.

Some management companies have turned dreams of home ownership into absolute nightmares, and that is certainly the case for my constituents in Barking. Residents of John Miller House and Leslie Hitchcock House on Minter Road face ongoing issues with their management company, RMG, and the district heating system that is in place. They face high, unexplained charges for their energy, including service charges that are not itemised. RMG has failed to install energy meters in individual properties, despite residents asking for them and RMG promising them. In the meantime, constituents in these

properties have been charged arbitrary estimates for their energy, including for energy they have not used. RMG has threatened them with legal notices and has in some cases demanded £6,000, be paid in 10 days. That is simply unjustifiable.

In my most recent interaction with RMG, it showed some willingness to engage and to rectify the situation, but it has also been clear that it is acting on behalf of a freeholder—a company called HomeGround. After a little digging around at Companies House, I have established that Baron William Astor is a director of HomeGround. This is a family with a long-standing connection to Parliament who have made their fortune through land and property. Now, they are seemingly exploiting my constituents through unfair energy bills and threatening them with legal action. Frustratingly, I am still waiting for a response from HomeGround. That is just one of the many examples faced by my constituents.

12.23 pm

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I draw hon. Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, because I am a local councillor. I also understand this issue more than most, because I live in a leasehold property.

I have a number of cases across my constituency of Broxbourne of leaseholders being ripped off by management companies, including High Leigh in Hoddesdon; Academia Avenue, Robinia Road and Watery Lane in Turnford; Aldermere Avenue and Magnolia Way in Flamstead End; and Eleanor House in Waltham Cross. These companies are completely unaccountable. There is a lack of transparency, and they simply do not care. If they deem that residents have underpaid by £10, or even £1, they are straight round to their door. However, when my residents—or constituents across the country—write or email asking for answers to their questions, these companies are absolutely nowhere to be seen. That is absolutely shocking, and it cannot be allowed to continue. As we have heard from Members across the House, our postbags are full with issue after issue. Sadly, I am yet to come across a company that is good in this area.

In the limited time available, I want to touch on the issue of solicitors and what people are being told when they buy these properties. Solicitors are not doing enough to point out all the red flags, including everything that residents are accountable for, what money they may have to pay and the previous accounts of the different estates. We really need to shine a light on the issue of solicitors; we cannot let them off the hook. I will be interested to hear the Minister's view on that.

12.25 pm

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stuart. Issues with leasehold, freehold and management companies might seem quite parochial, but they are actually quite pernicious and affect an ever-growing number of homeowners across the country. As the CMA pointed out, with over 80% of new developments now subject to freehold, it is increasingly the default model for housing delivery. That means that thousands of new homeowners across the country are on the hook for what is effectively a

[Alistair Strathern]

stealth tax, trapped paying a management company for a service—or the lack of a service—that a council would normally provide.

Alongside that, the agency that home ownership is meant to deliver is being undercut. Residents are often hit by punitive mortgage charges by overly penal management companies, and their home sales can fall through as a result of companies not providing paperwork quickly and efficiently. If we are going to live up to our ambition to deliver on the aspiration of home ownership for many more households across the country, we clearly have to tackle fleecehold, which is why I was so pleased to see the commitment in the Labour manifesto to do that.

What do we do? We know that switching on some of the regulatory provisions in the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act from the last Parliament will have some benefits for these homeowners, but we need to go much further. My ten-minute rule Bill, which was introduced before the recess, set out some important measures on the right to manage and on common adoptable standards, as well as on mandatory adoptions. I think that those will go a long way towards starting to tackle this issue at source for future households.

We need to think about what more we can do to support those homes that are already being impacted. We also need to think about what more we can do in the interim to prevent more unadopted estates from becoming the norm before we can act. I was pleased to join over 50 colleagues in writing to a number of large developers to challenge them on what more they can do with local authorities to prevent unadopted estates from becoming the norm. I would welcome the Minister's reflections on what more we can do in the meantime to move on that ambition.

12.27 pm

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Stuart. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for securing this important debate. Residential estate management is a scandalous reality affecting thousands of people across the country. Residents are left to navigate this complex landscape alone, often forced to pay escalating and unchallengeable fees for services they did not agree to, provided by companies they cannot remove.

Stephen from Glastonbury is permanently tied, alongside his neighbours, to contracts with FirstPort that are written into the Land Registry. They are charged £560 annually for minimum maintenance of open spaces, with fees rising annually despite declining standards. The residents are billed for obscure services, and when questioned, FirstPort offers vague justifications and claims that costs are rising to meet expectations. Whose expectations? They are certainly not the expectations of residents.

Another constituent, Anne, moved into her flat on Cavalier Way in Wincanton a year ago, having budgeted for a manageable service charge of £750. Within the last few months, she has been hit, without any consultation whatever, with a shocking £7,000 invoice from RMG, the management company, to cover stairwell repairs. By labelling that cost as a budget, rather than a service

charge, RMG seems to be attempting to sidestep the legal protections of section 20. When I met other residents of Cavalier Way last week, some told me that their costs were rising by a staggering 479% and that they simply do not have the means to pay those grossly inflated service charges.

The Liberal Democrats believe that that must change. We have long called for leasehold reform and the professionalisation of estate management so that homeowners can control their own properties.

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): I call Danny Beales.

12.29 pm

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Stuart, but I believe you have mistaken me for another ginger—there are a few of us in this Parliament.

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): Yes, I have. Apologies.

Luke Myer: It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship none the less, Mr Stuart, and I congratulate the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) on securing this debate.

We are at the foothills of a historic era for housebuilding, but the question is: what happens after we build those houses? Residents across my constituency are being hit by the fleecehold stealth tax. They pay for services twice: once in council tax and again in estate charges. I recently heard from residents of the Ladgate Woods development, who were contacted by their property management company with an unexpected bill to cover their neighbours' unpaid bills, despite already having paid their share in full. It cannot be right for responsible residents to be punished for doing the right thing.

Management firms are often faceless companies based miles away—or even abroad, as we have heard today—and they are completely unaccountable. Residents are left powerless, with no control, choice or clarity. There needs to be a clear pathway to the adoption of new developments by local councils, with a timeline for residents. To that end, I support the private Member's Bill of my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin (Alistair Strathern); I also take this opportunity to congratulate him on his recent engagement.

It is time that we ended the postcode lottery in which some homes are served by local councils, and others by firms that one would struggle to get on the phone. It is time we strengthened consumer protections for ordinary working families and put power back where it belongs: in the hands of residents.

12.31 pm

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for securing this debate. I have been supporting residents of both freehold and leasehold properties in Esher and Walton who are confronting a system that allows management companies to oversell seemingly attractive properties, but makes it extremely challenging to hold them accountable for overpriced services and service failures, or to get rid of them. I hope that the Government will look closely at the business model of such companies and the tactics that they employ.

In my constituency, I have supported residents of an estate composed of later-living leasehold flats spread across five blocks, who have secured the right to manage away from FirstPort. However, because the blocks are separate buildings, the residents of the 38 flats were required to establish five different right-to-manage companies, even though communal areas remain under the management of FirstPort. I urge the Government first to ensure that separate buildings on a single development can pursue the right to manage together, and secondly, to expand that right so that it covers communal areas. What consideration have the Government given to creating a statutory right to manage for freeholders that encompasses communal areas?

Many leasehold developments are principally intended for the elderly. Elderly residents often live in them for a comparatively short time and selling such leasehold properties is extremely challenging, so families often subsequently look to let them. FirstPort imposes a charge of 1% of a property's market value as a condition of letting it, and frequently overvalues properties in order to charge more. That one-off payment recurs each subsequent time the property is let. What is the Minister doing to protect elderly people from exploitative leasehold conditions in elderly living accommodation?

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): Order. With apologies to the five or six Back Benchers who have not been called, I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

12.32 pm

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Stuart. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) on securing a debate on residential estate management companies—an important issue for many of us up and down the country, and many of our constituents.

My hon. Friend has done a service both to her constituents and to people across the country by exposing, and placing on the record, the scandal of poor management companies. I do not want to denigrate companies that do a good job for the common areas and spaces that they are contracted to look after, but, as we have heard today, Members of Parliament too often hear how far too many companies are fleecing residents, charging rip-off prices and failing to respond to reasonable requests for repairs, information or accounts of how residents' money is being spent.

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): In the town of Teignmouth in my constituency of Newton Abbot, FirstPort has been buying up other management companies, and the sinking funds—the contingency paid by residents—appear to have disappeared: they have been sunk. Does my hon. Friend agree that that should be looked into?

Gideon Amos: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, who is doing a great service to his constituents by exposing that problem.

In too many constituencies, residents are plagued by rogue developers who provide housing under a freehold tenure, but force residents to accept the estate managers or shared owners of public spaces within the developments.

We have heard shocking examples from all over the country, which surely demonstrate the scale of the problem and the need to act. In one block of flats in my constituency of Taunton and Wellington, people have been unable to get repairs for a leaking roof from the owner of a building in Corporation Street—it has been leaking for nine years without being attended to.

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): In my constituency of South Cotswolds, there are tragic stories, including about disabled residents being trapped in their flats due to a lift being out of order. Another constituent was informed that their charges had risen from £1,500 to £2,100 per six months. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need urgent action from the Government to end this daylight robbery?

Gideon Amos: “Daylight robbery” is a good way of putting it. Those staggering increases in charges, with very little notice or warning to residents, are experienced in many of our constituencies, including my own.

In my constituency, I am receiving complaints about FirstPort from residents of Parsonage Court in Wellington, and from those of Quantock House, Pavilion Gardens, St George's Square and Firepool in Taunton. I am also receiving complaints about Cognatum Estates from residents of Cedar Gardens and Fullands Court. These issues are arising in a whole range of properties.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): One of my constituents, Mr Vivian Lythgoe, is here today because of FirstPort. Unfortunately, he has had to make the painful decision to sell his home because he is fed up with dealing with management companies that are not interested in leaseholders. He has been fighting FirstPort to try to make it carry out basic maintenance, which residents have already paid for. Residents are not cash cows for management companies or footnotes in company accounts; they are people. It is time that they were treated as such. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Gideon Amos: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is time for this shocking behaviour to be rectified and for legislation to be introduced. I will continue to work for the residents of the properties in my constituency that I have mentioned, and to get the legislation that we need.

Those who suffer from poor management can, of course, be leaseholders or freeholders. There are 4.8 million residential leasehold properties in England, which is equivalent to a fifth of the housing stock. That system is a relic of the feudal period. Its abolition has long been sought by Liberals and Liberal Democrats. The abolition of residential leasehold could be one of the most important carried-forward pieces of business from the last Liberal Government of about 100 years ago, which goes to show how long overdue it is.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): In my constituency of Horsham, we have many similar examples. Would my hon. Friend agree that although we certainly need legislation, the industry could act right now by introducing a voluntary code of practice? The industry does not have to wait for legislation; it should hear the call from across this Chamber.

Gideon Amos: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and is championing the issue in his constituency. The companies watching or reading the debate would do well to listen to his words, because they could easily improve their practices right now by introducing a code of practice, as he suggests.

Liberal Democrats believe that leasehold tenure should be abolished for all properties, including flats. For too long, homeowners have been exploited by what is ultimately a feudal system. Existing residential leasehold should be converted either to freehold or commonhold, as appropriate, and we urge the Government to introduce legislation to make that happen. On commonhold properties and commercial leaseholds, ground rent should be capped to a nominal fee, so that everyone has a degree of control over their property.

Of course, the Conservative Government introduced to Parliament the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act, which received Royal Assent in 2024. However, the secondary legislation, which would give leaseholders rights over their freeholder landlords when it comes to accounts and accountability in general, has failed to be enacted. Crucially, the Act fails to regulate property management agents. As my hon. Friend the Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) pointed out, there has been widespread agreement about that since the 2019 report chaired by the Cross Bencher Lord Best, supported by the Liberal Democrats in this House and in the other place. We need to see vital improvements to the 2024 Act. I hope the Minister will today confirm when secondary legislation will be introduced, or indeed other legislation on the regulation of property agents.

Liberal Democrats want the management of buildings to be professionalised. Building maintenance and safety need to be guaranteed, not dependent on whoever happens to be the freeholder. Nowhere has that been more important in terms of safety than in the entirely avoidable but tragic disaster of Grenfell Tower. Putting profit before safety, as Sir Martin Moore-Bick's report has found, was one of the chief causes of that fire. Just as profit-driven sign-off in the testing of building materials and in the inspection of buildings needs to be reversed with the ending of both the privatised Building Research Establishment and privatised building inspectors, so too there is surely now a need to regulate property agents—for safety reasons, as much as anything else.

Today is also Stephen Lawrence Day. As Stephen was a budding young architect, it is fitting that we are debating regulating building management agents; it would be even more fitting if there was a commitment today to bring legislation forward. Just as leaseholders are charged extortionate amounts while being poorly served by the landlords and estate management companies they employ, too many freeholders of their own homes find themselves beholden to others over whom they have no control in relation to the open spaces and common areas, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) mentioned.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): My own local council is attempting to address the issue of freehold through its new local plan, which I commend. Would my hon. Friend urge the Government to bring forward the legislation quickly in order to strengthen the council's position?

Gideon Amos: My hon. Friend must surely have read the next words of my speech, which urge the Government to make urgent progress on strengthening leaseholders' rights and on their draft leasehold and commonhold reform Bill.

We should, for example, make sure that legislation strengthens leaseholders' rights to extend their leases, to buy their freeholds, to take over the management of their buildings and to make commonhold the default tenure. We should also regulate ground rents for existing leaseholders, and freeholders too: it is surely time for legislation to enable freeholders to recover ownership and control over public spaces that surround and adjoin their homes, which are held by others for no reason other than to extract maximum payment. A single freeholder among many who exercises control over common areas, such as access roads and green spaces, should no longer be allowed to hold all other homeowners to ransom with ever increasing charges and unreasonable management practices.

Back in December last year, my hon. Friends on the Liberal Democrat Benches, led by my hon. Friend for South Devon, were the first to bring the directors of FirstPort to the House to account to MPs for their management. My hon. Friend has blazed a trail for those affected by the appalling management of common areas and public spaces.

I return to the issues in my constituency. One resident in Wellington has been unable for over a year to get reasonable adjustments for disabled access to her parking space, even though she is also a cancer sufferer. We have seen now that persuasion on its own is not enough. Just as it is high time for residential leasehold to be brought to an end, it is also time for legislation to enable freeholders of common areas to acquire open spaces and common areas from those who would hold ransom over them. As Liberal Prime Minister Lloyd George pointed out, these practices are not business but blackmail.

12.43 pm

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak with you in the Chair, Mr Stuart. I congratulate the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) on securing this important debate; the strength of feeling from the people speaking has been strong. Companies such as FirstPort should take note of that when it comes to the services they offer.

I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I will keep my remarks brief to give the Minister plenty of time to respond—the ball is very much in his court, as he knows—but I also might give time for interventions from Members who have not been able to make speeches in the main debate. It is safe to say that I will not mention every speech by name, as that would take too long, but I very much agree with the essence of all the contributions today.

I have come across these issues in my constituency, in estates in Malton and Easingwold. FirstPort was invariably the managing agent causing many of these difficulties. The best regulator is always competition. We need to make sure that it is easier for people to manage their own freehold estates and to swap between different managing agents. The speeches today have had in common references to high and sometimes spurious charges, as well as poor and obscure service. That is something I certainly recognise.

I also recognise, and am frustrated by the fact, that local authorities have moved to the model of granting consent for what have become known as fleecehold estates. It seems that residents on these estates do not understand why they have a two-tier system, paying council tax and for the management of the freehold estate, when other people in their locality do not. It is time look at this in more detail and to act. I am happy to have a cross-party conversation with the Minister on how we might work together to make sure this situation does not become worse. We should all note the excellent work of the Competition and Markets Authority on making sure that the default position is to have adoptable standards.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Lewis Cocking) for highlighting a point I do not believe anyone else did: the work of conveyancers. Conveyancers have moved towards a shed-based service. It used to be there was a local, friendly solicitor who would give good advice on a buy and the implications of it, but much of that has gone. We need to make sure our conveyancers are doing the right thing in terms of pointing out to someone buying a fleecehold property the potential problems for which they might have to take responsibility.

As has been mentioned, we legislated in this area in the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024. This gives the potential to challenge charges, makes the right to manage easier, and opens the door to first-tier tribunals on charges and to an ombudsman scheme. This is where I would like to ask the Minister some questions. He has a role in implementing the provisions of the Act, which will require secondary legislation. As I think was stated in his White Paper, consultation may also be required, both on right to manage and on potential access to ombudsman oversight of the companies managing these estates. He needs to approve an ombudsman scheme and publish guidance. To what timescales does he expect implementation to take place? For the residents Members across the House have discussed, there is clearly a pressing need.

Regarding the White Paper and the potential of the leasehold and commonhold reform Bill, I am interested in which specific further steps the Minister intends to take on oversight of these fleecehold situations. We also need to be clear on exactly where he is going with leasehold reform. The manifesto the Minister stood upon said very clearly that Labour would “finally bring the feudal leasehold system to an end”.

If that is his intention, is he talking purely about new leases or about existing leases? Clearly there are difficulties around those.

Finally, there is talk about a cap on ground rents. We have previously talked about a peppercorn charge. Where exactly is the Minister going with that? People need to know exactly what his intentions are.

12.48 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the chair, Mr Stuart. I congratulate the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) on securing this debate. I commend her for giving the House a much-needed opportunity to discuss the important matter of residential estate management companies in detail. I thank her for so clearly highlighting the pertinent issues in her opening

remarks. I also thank all the other hon. Members who have spoken for the insight they have provided. I assure them that I well understand the strength of feeling when it comes to this issue.

The debate as a whole has not only underscored the case for acting to tackle the problems associated with freehold estate management arrangements, but highlighted that those problems take various forms. Part of the challenge facing the Government, and why we believe appropriate consultation in this area is essential, is ensuring that the interventions we make in due course capture the diversity of models and challenges.

We have covered a large range of specific issues today. I will address as many as I can in my response. We have also strayed into leasehold and commonhold. The White Paper is very distinct from the freehold estate issues that the majority of hon. Members have spoken about today and on which I will therefore mainly focus my remarks.

The Government estimate that there may now be as many as 1.75 million homes on privately managed estates in England, although I must make clear that not all of them are liable to pay charges. As the debate has made abundantly clear, the prevalence of such freehold estates creates a wide range of problems—problems that, not least as a result of the dogged campaigning by groups such as the National Leasehold Campaign and the Home Owners Rights Network, are now well known and well understood by the public.

Historically, any given local authority and water company would adopt the respective parts of a new residential estate. They would set clear, adoptable standards and provide oversight to ensure those were delivered, but more recently, and especially over the past 10 to 15 years, we have witnessed the growth of private management arrangements, where shared infrastructure, amenities and open spaces are not adopted and responsibility for the costs of ongoing maintenance instead falls on the residents of the estate through an estate rent charge, which residents pay in addition to council tax. The infrastructure and amenities provided on these estates all too often do not meet the minimum standards for adoption. In the worst cases, residents are left living in unfinished and sometimes dangerous developments.

The problem of unfinished housing developments is obviously not confined to freehold estates, and part of the answer is the proper enforcement of planning obligations, but private management models clearly exacerbate the problems faced by many homeowners in this scenario by leaving them liable for the upkeep of the partially completed or unfinished infrastructure.

That is just one of the many problems that residential freeholders living on freehold estates across the country are struggling with. Others include poor service and abuse at the hands of unscrupulous managing agents—we have heard many such examples in the debate today—as well as limited to no transparency about how the charges they pay are spent, onerous restrictions placed on the title deeds of their properties, and a general lack of control over how their estate is managed. These problems are more acute in some cases than others. For example, the absence of any measure of control is most acute in the case of the approximately 20% of freehold estates that have what is known as an embedded management company set in the title deeds of the relevant properties. To take another example, the challenges associated with opaque fees are magnified in estates where management

[Matthew Pennycook]

arrangements are fragmented, with more than one managing company; residents have to navigate multiple companies, each of which levy fees for services in a way that significantly increases the potential for abuse.

As many hon. Members mentioned, last year, the Competition and Markets Authority published its study into the housebuilding industry. I encourage any hon. Member who has not yet had the time to read that report in full to do so. The CMA identified the private management of public amenities on housing estates as a detriment to consumers and concluded that

“the root cause of the aggregate detriment...is the decrease in levels of adoption of amenities by relevant authorities”.

The Government agree with the CMA’s conclusion that the housebuilding market is not delivering for consumers and has consistently failed to do so over successive decades.

As hon. Members will be aware, the report made a number of recommendations to Government and we published a response in full. It called for measures to strengthen protection for existing homeowners, as well as for the Government to mandate adoption of all new estates and to implement common adoptable standards for infrastructure. The Government have accepted many of the recommendations in principle, but we recognise that further work is required in a number of areas.

In the immediate term, we need to introduce protections for residential freeholders on already constructed freehold estates. As hon. Members mentioned many times, part 5 of the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2004 contains powers to establish a regulatory framework that to provide such protections, including the provision of standardised demands and an annual report; giving homeowners the right to challenge the reasonableness of charges levied; requiring estate managers to consult homeowners where the anticipated costs exceed an appropriate amount; and giving residential freeholders the right to apply to a tribunal to appoint a manager in the event of serious management failure. Taken together, these measures will vastly improve the situation for many residential freeholders, improving transparency and driving accountability among estate management companies.

As I set out in my written ministerial statement last November, the Government recognise the importance of acting as quickly as is feasible to implement these provisions, but the establishment of a new regulatory framework through detailed secondary legislation requires us to grapple with a range of technical questions. It is important that we carry out appropriate consultation to make sure that the new system operates effectively and to the lasting benefit of residential freeholders.

John Glen: The Minister is setting out a thorough analysis of the challenge that he faces. Could he say something about the distinction between existing entities and those that are yet to be set up? One of the concerns is that the Government’s legislation will not deal fully with existing arrangements, and that the none of the cases that we have heard about today will get redress from the Government’s intervention.

Matthew Pennycook: To be clear, the protections we are talking about, which we intend to switch on as soon as is feasible and were provided for by powers under the

Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act passed by the previous Government, will benefit existing residential freeholders on existing estates. I will come to the prevalence of those arrangements in due course, but I can reassure hon. Members that we intend to carry out that consultation this year, as promised, and that I am doing everything I can to expedite it.

Beyond the short-term need to protect residential freeholders better, we have to take steps to reduce the prevalence of private estate management arrangements, which are the root cause of the problems we are considering today. In my written ministerial statement, I committed the Government to consulting on legislative and policy options to achieve that objective. I hope that hon. Members appreciate that this is not a simple and straightforward area of policy and that the implications of policy choices are potentially far-reaching.

Lewis Cocking: Will the Minister give way?

Matthew Pennycook: Yes. I will try to give way to as many hon. Members as I can.

Lewis Cocking: I want to make a point about solicitors’ practices and what information people get when they buy their properties. I think that a number of people go into these contracts under false pretences and do not fully understand what they are responsible for and what they may end up paying for.

Matthew Pennycook: There are undoubtedly issues around the purchase of homes on these estates. For example, it appears to be fairly common for residential freeholders not to be notified of their future liability for charges early in the conveyancing process. We are giving due consideration to those issues as well.

On the prevalence of future arrangements, the Government intend to seek views from a wide range of interested parties, including local authorities, management companies, developers and residential freeholders themselves. Our consultation will need to consider a wide range of trade-offs, including costs to homeowners, costs to local authorities, potential impacts on housing supply and the links with the planning system. As promised, we will consult on that matter this year.

Jim Shannon: Hon. Members have referred to opting out—in other words, if someone is unhappy with their management company, they can opt for another one. Would the Minister consider that, and would it be considered in the discussions he has with the Northern Ireland Assembly and the pertinent Minister?

Matthew Pennycook: Given the time available to me, I will have a separate conversation with the hon. Gentleman outside.

Before I conclude, I want to touch on the issue of managing agents, whose performance can present significant challenges, whether they are chosen by residents or employed by developers. Managing agents perform a critical role in managing and maintaining freehold estates as well as leasehold buildings, and the Government are determined to raise standards among them and drive out abuse and poor service at the hands of unscrupulous agents. We remain fully committed to strengthening the regulation of managing agents of leasehold properties and estate managers of freehold estates. We are looking again at the report published in 2019 by the regulation

of property agents working group chaired by Lord Best. At a minimum, we believe that the regulation of managing agents should include mandatory professional qualifications. That will apply whether the agent manages a building or an estate. We will consult on the detail of that matter this year and remain committed to publishing a draft leasehold and commonhold reform Bill in the second half of this year to provide for enhanced scrutiny on the part of Parliament.

I again thank the hon. Member for South Devon for securing the debate and all those who have taken part in it. The Government intend to act, and act decisively, to protect residential freeholders on freehold estates and to reduce the prevalence of these arrangements over the long term. I look forward to ongoing engagement with hon. Members on all sides of the House—I welcome the shadow Minister's invitation to that end—through both the forthcoming formal statutory consultations and more informal engagement across the House to ensure that we reform the system to the lasting benefit of affected homeowners.

12.58 pm

Caroline Voaden: I will be very quick as we are short of time. I thank all hon. Members for coming and sharing their experiences. It is clear that there is a strong feeling in the House that we need to act and that millions of people are being badly served by estate management companies. It is good to hear that looking at the behaviour of estate management companies, as well as the position of leaseholders and freeholders, is on the Government's agenda. I appreciate that this is a complicated area of legislation; the Minister laid that out clearly. We are willing to work across the House to reach some sensible steps forward in legislation so that there can be redress for people who have until now been badly affected by estate management companies and so that the practice ends forthwith.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered residential estate management companies.

Statutory Sick Pay

1 pm

Graham Stuart (in the Chair): I will call Imran Hussain to move the motion, and I will then call the Minister to respond. I remind other Members that they may make a speech only with prior permission from the Member in charge and the Minister. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I beg to move,
That this House has considered the rate of Statutory Sick Pay.

It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart.

Successive Governments have grappled with statutory sick pay, with report after report saying that we need fundamental, root-and-branch change to a system that is letting workers down every day. Frankly, successive Governments have failed to tackle this important issue head-on, with many actively avoiding or dodging it.

I am therefore glad that, within their first 100 days, this Labour Government delivered on our pledges and introduced a transformative, once-in-a-generation Employment Rights Bill to drag workers' rights into the 21st century. Although the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Bromborough (Justin Madders), who is largely responsible for the Bill, is not here today, I put on record my thanks to him. In a previous role, I had the pleasure of working alongside him in developing much of the policy outlined in the Bill, which will mean that workers' rights in our country are fit for purpose.

The Bill makes welcome changes to statutory sick pay. In 2022, a Trades Union Congress survey found that 80% of those earning more than £50,000 a year receive their full pay when sick, compared with only a third of those earning under £15,000. Around half of all employees in the UK get their full pay, just under a third get statutory sick pay, and one in 10 gets nothing at all. Most low-paid employees—around 8 million—are in the middle group, reliant on statutory sick pay.

For those workers, the measures in the Employment Rights Bill are much welcome: removing the three-day waiting period so that workers are eligible for sick pay from day one; removing the lower earnings limit and extending sick pay eligibility to 1.3 million of the lowest-paid workers currently denied it due to the lower earnings limit of £123; and setting the 80% earnings replacement rate. However, as the TUC, the safe sick pay campaign and many others have said, we must not stop here. We must continue to be ambitious in strengthening workers' rights.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing a debate on this critical issue. In my constituency and probably his, many small and medium-sized businesses are struggling—let us be honest—with the rise in national insurance contributions. Does he agree that, building on Labour's Employment Rights Bill, the Minister and the Government might need to step in to ensure that such businesses, which are facing rising national insurance contributions, can still deliver statutory sick pay for their small group of employees?

Imran Hussain: Absolutely. I agree with the hon. Gentleman. He makes an important point that I will address more substantially later in my speech. He will

[Imran Hussain]

also understand that having a healthier workforce and limiting presenteeism would massively increase the productivity of those small and medium-sized businesses in the long run. One of the huge issues we currently face is that people who are too sick to work are being forced to do so, because of the lack of support. That is not good for them or for businesses.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate and on running an important campaign to increase statutory sick pay so that it is a real sick pay on which people can rely. He talks in detail about the welcome advances on sick pay made in the Government's recent Employment Rights Bill, but does he agree that a real concern about those proposals is that 300,000 of the poorest workers could lose out? Do the Government need to look at this again?

Imran Hussain: As ever, my hon. Friend makes an important and pertinent point. If he bears with me, I will address that later in my contribution. It is actually one of two points I want to address.

Hon. Members will know that I tabled two amendments to the Employment Rights Bill to strengthen its provisions on statutory sick pay. The first sought to bring statutory sick pay into line with the national living wage, so that no full-time worker is forced to live in poverty while unwell. The second amendment aimed to guarantee that no worker would be worse off under the new system, regardless of their earnings—my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon) made reference to that, and I will come on to it.

First, I turn to the rate of statutory sick pay. For far too long, our statutory sick pay system has been one of inadequacy, and it has failed workers when they are at their most vulnerable. The pandemic laid bare just how broken the system is. Over a third of workers rely on statutory sick pay, and at a rate of £118.75 a week it is nothing more than a cruel joke—a poverty wage that leaves workers in financial insecurity, instead of being able to rest, recover and take the time they need to return to work fully fit.

The current rate makes up a mere 16.5% of the average weekly wage in the UK, far behind our European counterparts. To name some, workers in Iceland, Norway and Luxembourg are entitled to up to 100% of their pay during sick leave. However, we do not trail far behind only our international counterparts. When statutory sick pay was introduced in the 1980s, it was equivalent to 35% of the average weekly wage—double what workers can expect today. No other financial responsibility in a worker's life is ever slashed by 83%. When someone falls ill, their bills, their council tax, their electricity bill, their mortgage payments and their grocery bills do not suddenly go down. That poses the question: why does statutory sick pay remain such a paltry sum, forcing people to choose between their health and their financial survival?

We know that the current rate pushes too many workers into the workplace when they are simply not well enough. It entrenches presenteeism, harming public health, reducing productivity and contributing to longer-term sickness and burnout, which makes workers drop out of the workforce entirely. The clear consensus is that the rate of statutory sick pay must increase, and it must increase in line with the national living wage.

That call is echoed by unions such as Unite and Unison, and by organisations such as the Child Poverty Action Group, Scope, Mind and Disability Rights UK. It is also supported by the majority of the British public. I urge the Minister not to ignore the swell of public opinion or the needs of workers across the UK, and to share the next steps that the Government are taking to fairly recompense workers during periods of illness.

The rate of statutory sick pay is not the only change that is urgently needed. Despite the Government's best efforts, those on the lowest incomes, who do the hard and vital work in our economy, will be financially penalised for falling ill. These are the workers who are the backbone of our economy: cleaners, carers, drivers and retail workers. They are the very people who can least afford it. Low-paid workers—disproportionately women, young people and disabled workers—will still face the hardest burden.

The reality is that the new 80% earnings replacement rate extends sick pay to those who were previously excluded, which is very welcome, but it risks creating a system where some workers are worse off. I have worked with the Minister for many years, and I am sure that this was not the Government's intention. But under the new rules, the reality remains that more than 300,000 workers earning between £123 and £146 a week could see their sick pay cut, which is something that my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East referred to.

While previously a worker earning £123 a week was entitled to an earnings replacement of 95%, which is comparable to statutory maternity leave, for example, now a worker earning £124 for three days' work a week will receive 80% from the first day of illness—£99.22 a week. Under the old rules they would have been entitled to the flat rate of £118.75 from the fourth day of illness. Under the new rules they will be worse off after five weeks. The fact that it takes five weeks to become worse off should not be seen as a mitigating factor, because this is not just about numbers.

The new rules will directly affect workers with chronic illnesses, those recovering from serious surgery and those undergoing cancer treatment. In short, it affects the people who can least afford to take a financial hit at the most vulnerable time of their life. These are workers who rely on every penny that they earn, and they must not be left behind under the new rules. That is the bare minimum that working people should expect.

I ask the Minister to outline how the Government will be supporting workers with chronic illnesses who fall sick, especially those who currently work and rely on disability benefits such as the personal independence payment to be able to dress, wash and get out and about in their daily lives. These workers have been left terrified by the recent announcement of changes to PIP eligibility criteria, and now they could also see statutory sick pay reduced, if they find themselves in that situation.

I urge the Government to think again about making the most vulnerable in our society pay for economic instability that is not of their making. It is not just an economic issue but a moral one. We can and must go further to support workers during their most vulnerable times.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): In my Horsham constituency office, I employ a member of staff who has ME. Fortunately, we can be very flexible with their

working hours. However, under current law—where statutory sick pay is based on days worked not hours worked—an ME sufferer could easily miss out altogether on sick pay. Does the hon. Member agree that the Government should legislate to ensure that all employees are granted fair access to sick pay?

Imran Hussain: Absolutely—that is the crux. As I said before, I acknowledge that the Government have gone a considerable way. The Employment Rights Bill will make significant changes that allow millions of people to benefit from statutory sick pay when they would not have before. But the journey must not end there. The hon. Member is absolutely right that there are many people who are still missing out—there are 300,000 people who will significantly miss out, as I said.

This is not just an economic issue, and it should not be viewed as one. It is a moral issue. The Government have the power to ensure that every worker—whether in an office, a hospital, a factory or on the frontline—can take the time they need to recover without fear of financial ruin. They also have the power to ensure that no worker, especially those with long-term illnesses, receives less under the new rules than they would have received before. Let me be clear: we cannot allow this opportunity to pass without ensuring that every worker benefits from the changes we have introduced. This is our chance to build a fairer society that treats working people with the dignity and respect they deserve.

I hope the Minister, for whom I have much respect and regard, understands that I come at this from a place of support. He has a long track record of understanding these issues, and this is our opportunity. We must go further, because that is the only way we will address this matter, so I urge him to do so. Will he commit to reviewing SSP so that workers no longer have to rely on poverty pay when they are sick? Will he today commit to reviewing the impact of the new changes, specifically in relation to the 300,000 people who will be worse off under the new 80% replacement rate?

On the second question in particular, I urge the Minister to provide information to allow the House to see the impact on those 300,000 people. I do not believe for one minute that the Government intend to make them worse off; but, equally, I do not think we can just ignore it.

Finally, will the Minister outline exactly what steps he is taking to make sure that those with the most severe illnesses, and those who find themselves sick or in recovery for longer than five weeks, do not find themselves unfairly punished? The Minister knows that if we fail here, we will fail an entire generation of workers.

1.16 pm

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stuart. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East (Imran Hussain) on securing this debate and on the thoughtful way he set out his case.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the fact that this issue has been dodged for a long time. Proposals for reform of statutory sick pay were brought forward in 2019; they were paused for the pandemic and never brought back. My hon. Friend and I agree that the Government inherited a statutory sick pay system

that fosters economic insecurity at work, particularly for the lowest earners. The pandemic exposed just how precarious work and life are for people on low incomes, with many people forced to choose between health, including the health of others, and financial hardship—an impossible position.

My hon. Friend focused on the rate of statutory sick pay, but I want to highlight the actions that the Government are taking to implement the plan to make work pay—the plan that he has referred to and supported—and ensure that the safety net of sick pay is available to those who need it. I think the change will meet exactly the point that the hon. Member for Horsham (John Milne) raised in his intervention.

Insecure, low-paid and irregular work has been the lot of far too many people for far too long. The Employment Rights Bill, which had its Second Reading in the other place just before Easter—I echo my hon. Friend's tribute to the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Bromborough (Justin Madders)—will turn the tide. It is the biggest upgrade to workers' rights in a generation. It will boost living standards and improve our economic growth prospects, thanks to urgently needed reforms to our economy.

Through the Bill, we are, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East set out, extending statutory sick pay to those earning below the lower earnings limit, and also removing the waiting period, making it payable from the first rather than the fourth day of sickness absence. I think those two points, and in particular the removal of the waiting period, will address the concern raised by the hon. Member for Horsham. These are very important steps to strengthen statutory sick pay, and I am glad to hear the strong support from my hon. Friend and others for the changes.

I heard my hon. Friend's calls for further reform of the system, including the call to increase the flat rate. The rate of statutory sick pay is designed to balance providing a basic level of support for employees when they are unable to work due to sickness with helping to manage the cost to employers. It is very important to get that balance right. That is where the debate is likely to focus.

The changes through the Employment Rights Bill mean that up to 1.3 million low-paid employees will now be entitled to statutory sick pay, and all eligible employees will be paid from the first day of sickness absence, benefiting many millions. As part of removing the lower earnings limit we committed to a fair earnings replacement. We consulted on the percentage rate last year, and the conclusion from that exercise—the new rate: 80% of normal weekly earnings or the flat rate, whichever is the lower—strikes the right balance between providing financial security to employees while limiting additional cost to employers. That is important because, as set out in the regulatory impact assessment, the reforms will obviously increase the aggregate amount of sick pay that employees receive—an estimated increase of £420 million per year.

At an individual level, the removal of the waiting period means that all employees will receive at least £60 extra at the start of their sickness absence; if they work just two days a week, they will get £150 extra compared with the current system. Removing the waiting period has the added advantage of making a phased

[Sir Stephen Timms]

return to work easier, which has always been one of the aims for reforming statutory sick pay. That can be a very effective way of helping people and making it possible for them to return from a period of absence and stay in work, reducing the flow into economic inactivity and the additional costs to business. The change also means that an employee who earns just below the lower earnings limit could now be entitled to up to £100, compared with nothing under the current system.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East set out potential benefits from going further for disabled people and people with health impairments. The concerns he set out are among the reasons we set up the Keep Britain Working independent review, which is being undertaken by Sir Charlie Mayfield, who used to run John Lewis, to consider what employers can do in order better to support disabled people and people with health impairments to work, and what the Government can do to promote improved practices on the part of employers. After conducting an initial phase of “discovery” of the underlying issues, the review has launched a call to all stakeholders to engage with the early review findings and to input views, including via a survey launched on gov.uk. I encourage everyone interested in today’s debate to look at the questions in the survey and respond to it.

My hon. Friend suggested that the system ought to be aligned more closely with the national living wage and referred to the amendment to that effect that he tabled to the Employment Rights Bill on Report. The difficulty is that that would increase costs on business by some £1.3 billion per year on top of the changes that we are already making through the Bill, with no mechanism for employers to reclaim those costs. Given the quite substantial differences in how the national living wage and statutory sick pay are calculated, there would need to be big changes to the statutory sick pay system and further consultation with businesses and employees about that. It would also significantly impact the work and scope of the Low Pay Commission. But the big issue is the additional cost to business of going ahead with a proposal along the lines that my hon. Friend suggests and, for that reason, the Government have decided not to do that.

Sometimes, in debates on this topic—my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East touched on this—the models for sick pay arrangements in other countries are highlighted. They provide a useful and informative comparison, and it is important to look at them. It is also important to recognise that sick pay arrangements sit within the context of different social security systems, different economies and different employment obligations and protections in different countries, so simply comparing sick pay arrangements can be a bit misleading.

Of course, many employers already go beyond their statutory obligations by offering employees occupational or contractual sick pay. Around 60% of employees report being eligible for such arrangements from their employer during sickness absence, but some people will require further support during a period of sickness absence. They may need additional financial support. They may be able to claim more help through the social security system, in particular universal credit—my hon.

Friend mentioned PIP as well—depending on their circumstances. We are determined that that support will continue to be available.

My hon. Friend expressed concern that some employees might receive less under the new system than the current one—a point also raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon). The removal of the waiting period will mean that all employees will be entitled to more statutory sick pay for the first three weeks. My hon. Friend the Member for Bradford East talked about five weeks, but with a significant payment up front there will clearly be a period during which people will receive more. Absences in the first three weeks represent 87% of all sickness absences, according to the Department’s 2023 employee survey. The number who are out of work on statutory sick pay for the longer period beyond the one that my hon. Friend referred to will be quite small. I am certainly not claiming that there will not be anybody, but it will be quite a small number.

The changes we are bringing forward will help stop people being forced to work when they are unwell. They will also support very effectively the lowest paid employees, who will always receive the highest income replacement rate of 80%, having not been supported in the past. An alternative approach to removing the lower earnings limit has been suggested, and my hon. Friend touched on it, but we think that would create a pretty unfair system, because some employees would receive a greater earnings replacement rate—up to 100%—than people earning less than them. In an extreme case, 1p in average weekly earnings could potentially make nearly a £24-a-week difference in entitlement. I do not think that would be the right thing to do, and I think my hon. Friend would recognise that that would not be a very satisfactory state of affairs. I have not seen a model that guarantees that everybody will be better off that does not have that problem. The Department will, I hope later this week, publish a fact sheet on gov.uk that addresses those concerns in more detail.

There has been discussion about whether there should be a rebate to employers to help them with the increased cost of statutory sick pay. There has been a rebate system in the past, but it was rather complicated, it was expensive to administer, it was not always taken up by small employers and it did not encourage employers to support their employees. By contrast, under the new system, employers stand to benefit from increased productivity among their employees offsetting the additional cost, which is reckoned to be about £15 per employee per year.

I again congratulate and thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. I welcome his thoughtful engagement on the important matters that he has raised, not just in this debate, but in the Chamber on Report of the Employment Rights Bill and, I recall, directly with the Prime Minister. He is raising important points in a constructive and thoughtful way. As the changes to SSP being taken forward through the Employment Rights Bill move closer to implementation, we will continue working closely with employees, trade unions and businesses to deliver a system that is fair, supportive and effective for all. To pick up my hon. Friend’s point, we will monitor the impact of these measures to strengthen statutory sick pay, as well as how SSP is used by employers and how effectively it supports employees.

I am grateful for the opportunity to set out the Government's position and I am sure we will talk about it again.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

1.30 pm

Sitting suspended.

Retail Investment

[WERA HOBHOUSE *in the Chair*]

4.30 pm

Callum Anderson (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab):
I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for retail investment.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury for joining us today and for her continued engagement on this subject, and I thank hon. Members from across the House for making time for the debate.

I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the matter of retail investment in the UK stock market. This is about more than just the financial sector or the City of London; it is about how people across our country, from Sunderland to Swansea and Buckingham to Bletchley, can build more secure financial futures while helping the UK economy to grow.

When people use their own money to invest in shares, Government bonds or other regulated financial products, that is a force for good. It gives them agency and an opportunity to own a stake in the companies that they work for, buy from and depend on in everyday life. At its best, it allows people from every corner of our country to share in the success of our economy, to grow their wealth, to build financial resilience and to prepare for life's great milestones, such as weddings, and unexpected moments.

Retail investment does not just help individuals; it helps companies, too. The capital that individuals invest provides the fuel for companies to expand, innovate and create jobs in every part of the UK. That is good for productivity, wages and Britain's international competitiveness. Having more individual investors also strengthens our financial markets. They bring more stability, deliver more liquidity to our capital markets and provide a stronger base of support for UK quoted companies, making them more resilient to global shocks—be they pandemics or unexpected impositions of tariffs—and better equipped to focus on building their commercial offer.

The UK has a proud history as a global financial centre. We attract capital from across the world, and we should be proud to do so. We used to pair that with high levels of retail participation by British citizens, but sadly that has changed. The data paints a stark picture. In the early 1960s, individuals in the UK owned, by value, a little over half of all shares traded on the London stock exchange; today that figure is barely 10%. At the same time, overseas ownership of UK shares has risen to almost 58%.

What is more, according to studies from the London-based New Financial think-tank, the proportion of UK households that directly own shares has halved in under two decades, from 22% in 2004 to just 11% in 2022. That is far below the proportion in many developed countries, such as Sweden, where over a fifth of households own shares. There are many interconnected reasons behind those trends, and I do not propose to examine each in detail right now. Of course, some people simply cannot afford to invest, particularly when the cost of living remains high; others feel that they do not know

[*Callum Anderson*]

where to begin or do not trust the system to work for them; and many are simply more comfortable with cash, even though it often fails to keep pace with inflation.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that increasing the participation in retail investment of women, who make up more than 50% of the UK's population, is crucial not only for gender equality, but for the UK's economic resilience? At present, women in the UK are significantly less likely than men to invest in stocks, individual savings accounts or pensions, despite often achieving comparable or better returns when they do. By addressing the gender investment gap through education, accessible financial products and tailored support, we can empower more women to grow their wealth independently, reduce long-term financial inequality and boost the overall vibrancy of the UK retail investment market.

Callum Anderson: My hon. Friend is quite right; it is really important that we encourage women and other under-represented groups to invest and participate in owning a part of their economy. By encouraging retail investment we are able to reduce a variety of wealth gaps, including the gender wealth gap. I should add that there is a social justice element, too. People from middle-class or wealthier families are simply much more likely than those from ordinary working-class backgrounds to be exposed to the range of financial options available. That creates an asymmetrical divide in confidence, knowledge and opportunity.

This matters because when UK citizens own less of their economy, the consequences are much more than just financial. It affects the efficacy of our economic model, the shape and direction of our growth path, our ability to support home-grown innovation and even, as we have seen in recent weeks, our economic sovereignty. If we want a strong economy that genuinely works for everyone, we must do what we can to help more of our constituents take part in it, not just as workers or consumers but as co-owners.

I want to reiterate that this is not about helping the City of London. It is about helping everyday people—our constituents—make the most of their money and have a say in the companies that are shaping their lives. We know that long-term investing consistently outperforms keeping money in cash savings or bonds.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I recently met representatives of Morrisons, the fifth largest supermarket chain in the country, which is headquartered in Bradford. Since 2021, it has been owned by a private equity firm. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to ensure that we retain family-owned British companies? When they are sold to private equity companies, there is a risk of undermining long-term patient capital and investment in the social fabric as well as the businesses themselves.

Callum Anderson: As I have mentioned ad nauseam since I was elected, my mum works for Morrisons, so I know the impact that various structures of ownership can have on workers and customers. My hon. Friend is right that that is one of the many factors that we should consider as policymakers.

A £100 investment in Government gilts in 1900 would have returned around £463 by 2019. The same investment in UK equities would have yielded £35,000. Despite that, many Britons still keep the bulk of their money in cash. In the G7, only the citizens of Germany and Japan hold more of their national wealth in cash than we do. Inflation, even at modest levels, steadily eats away at its value. I believe that we must do more to help people feel confident in making smart, informed, long-term choices, and that starts with awareness, the right tools and advice, and trust.

Let us take ISAs, the most commonly known product, as an example. In the 2022-23 financial year, the latest for which official statistics are known, more than 12 million adult ISA accounts were active, yet nearly two thirds of the total value—almost £290 billion—was held in cash. That is more than £290 billion earning very little return indeed. Some major high street banks, which I will decline to name, are at the moment offering as little as 1.35% interest on cash ISAs, yet we know that inflation has consistently outpaced that rate for the past four years; indeed, it has sometimes reached double figures.

Many financial experts and advisers will rightly recommend keeping three, six or nine months of living expenses in cash savings. I know from my early career in financial inclusion charities that, for many households, possessing even £500 in emergency savings can often be out of reach. Let me be clear again: this debate is not about replacing or discouraging cash savings—far from it. It is about showing that even small investments—£10, £20 or £50 per month—can make a real difference over time.

If more people invest, our economy will be stronger in the long run. Imagine if we could shift just 10% or 20% of that £290 billion towards more productive, growth-inducing assets. That would mean more companies starting, growing and scaling right here in the United Kingdom and, therefore, more jobs, better pay and more people gaining that crucial bit of additional disposable income to invest for themselves or, perhaps just as importantly, to enjoy life with their families. That is the virtuous cycle that I believe we all agree that we need to build.

How can we—Parliament, Government, regulators and the industry itself—go about working towards that together? Ultimately, I believe that the UK would greatly benefit from a long-term retail investment strategy invested in by Parliament, Government, regulators and the industry. For the purpose of this debate, I think there are four immediate priorities.

First, we need to simplify the ISA framework and reform it to better support British investment. There are four types of ISAs, each with slightly different rules. For many, that is simply confusing and, I think, off-putting. Why not consolidate those products into a single ISA, with stocks and shares ISAs the default but, crucially, people can still hold cash if they choose?

The Government might also wish to consider reviewing the stamp duty framework on share purchases. Currently, it is cheaper for an individual investor to buy shares in Illumina than in Oxford Nanopore, in Lockheed Martin than in BAE Systems, and in Tesla than in Rolls-Royce. Is it time for us to ask ourselves whether we want to continue making it more expensive for Britons to buy British?

Finally on this point, we should ensure that ISA tax exemptions align much better with the needs of the UK economy as a whole. Today, someone can put £20,000 in a tax-free wrapper that invests in companies that create no jobs in the UK, pay nothing into our Exchequer, generate no domestic growth and contribute no intellectual property or research and development. Should we as legislators be asking ourselves whether that is a good use of taxpayer subsidy? Is it time to look again at the original PEP—personal equity plan—model introduced by Nigel Lawson in the 1980s, which required at least 50% of the ISA allowance to be directed towards UK-focused assets? That could strike a better balance between supporting investment freedoms and choice, and the national interest.

Secondly, we must boost, embed and entrench the virtues of financial education, because if people do not understand how investing works, they simply will not do it. I welcome the Government's continued support for the Financial Conduct Authority's review of the boundary between financial advice and guidance. It is really important that people can get timely and affordable help when making big financial decisions so that they can make the most of their money, but I think there is scope for us—for Britain—to go further.

Let us be honest: as I said in my opening remarks, kids from wealthier backgrounds are more likely than those from less wealthy families to hear about compound interest, investment portfolios and ISAs at the dinner table. That is why financial education should form a part of everyone's life, from school right through to retirement, so that people feel confident and well informed at every stage of their life. That means recommitting ourselves to properly implementing age-appropriate financial education throughout our school system, from basic budgeting and saving at a young age, to more sophisticated learning about investment, risk and long-term planning in later school years. This is not just about economics; it is about equity and fairness.

Thirdly, we need to make it easier for citizens to engage with the companies they invest in. I believe that primarily means finishing the work of Sir Douglas Flint's Digitisation Taskforce at pace, ending paper share certificates and creating a fully transparent modern shareholding system. However, it is also about access to information: right now, only the big top-tier institutions get first-class research; retail investors get patchy websites filled with jargon, if they get anything at all. The UK should be developing high-quality and accessible investment information, especially for those smaller UK firms that have the potential to be the Googles and Nvidias of tomorrow.

Fourthly and finally, we must fundamentally shift the British culture and mindset into individual investing. Too many of our constituents still see investing as something that other people do—something for the wealthy, or the experts, or the lucky to do. We must challenge that mistaken perception head-on. Why not launch a modern, compelling and inclusive public awareness campaign—perhaps a 21st-century version of "Tell Sid"? It should focus on real people, real lives, and real, genuine, tangible benefits that people can see in their local community. It should be visible, too, in universities, in jobcentres, in community places and in our workplaces, because this is not just a personal finance issue; it is a national opportunity.

I think that the case for retail investment is clear and I believe that this Labour Government have the chance to fuse their democratic socialism with a modern brand of democratic capitalism. By helping more people to invest in their own economy, we empower citizens, grow our companies and build a more prosperous country for everyone. I believe that capital markets can and should serve everyone, and that it is our job in this place to make that a reality.

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called to speak.

4.47 pm

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley (Callum Anderson) on securing such an important debate and on covering so comprehensively and so vividly the challenges in the retail investment sector.

When I speak to people across my constituency about the challenges they face and particularly when I speak to entrepreneurs, the lack of financial education in schools often comes up; too often, however, a lack of confidence in rural infrastructure is also raised with me, and as the MP for a very sparsely populated seat, I will focus my remarks in part on that issue, as well as on some of the points that are more directly relevant to retail investment.

One of the things I have discussed with local businesses such as the Allendale Brewery, which I managed to visit over the recess, is the lack of targeted support, not just for retail investment but for entrepreneurs in rural areas, to make sure that their business ideas can be brought to completion. Grants or other forms of support relevant to urban areas simply do not exist in rural areas where, to be honest, the jobs created through such investment can have a transformational impact, due to the fact that a couple of jobs created in a small village will have a far greater effect than the creation of a couple of jobs in a city.

While we are talking about banks and large financial services, I also recognise that the withdrawal of those services and organisations from rural communities is incredibly worrying and incredibly damaging to people starting their investment, who cannot see anyone with the knowledge or ability to advise them. People are unable to go to those institutions for life's expected or unexpected moments. If the proposed Lloyds closures across the Hexham constituency go through, there will be very few bank branches in my constituency, which will present a major challenge. I raised the subject in an Adjournment debate shortly after I was elected, so I know that the Minister is very aware of my position and views on rural bank branch closures, but I will not miss an opportunity to raise it again.

I also quickly want to raise an issue brought to my attention by the Vintage Hub, a fantastic business in my constituency. Its owners, Lisa and Douglas, were faced with a 40% rent increase from Advance Northumberland, an arm's length body of Northumberland county council, which was simply not sustainable. One of the issues that I constantly hear about is lack of appropriate infrastructure, with the hiking up of rents driving people out of what are often commercially viable businesses. I know that the Vintage Hub is a very successful business, but in the block that it rents three businesses were forced to leave

[Joe Morris]

the unit because of the rent rise inflicted on them by an arms-length body of the Tory-run Northumberland county council.

I am sure the Minister is listening to this, but we need to ensure that we develop a financial services growth and competitiveness strategy that does not just prioritise retail investment across the country to restore our high streets, but takes into account the unique circumstances of local communities. It needs to get long-term, patient capital into communities that will otherwise be left behind in the past. I am thinking of smaller villages across the Tyne valley in areas that have been forgotten about for far too long, where we consistently see “To Let” or “For Sale” signs on prominent, attractive high street shops. We need to encourage development. I hope that how best to deploy retail investment capital is a major part of what the Government look at going forward.

4.51 pm

Kanishka Narayan (Vale of Glamorgan) (Lab): It is a privilege to speak with you in the Chair, Mrs Hobhouse. It is a particular privilege to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley (Callum Anderson), who secured this debate and led it with expected expertise. I know that he brings a great deal of professional experience from his career prior to this place. It also a privilege to see the Economic Secretary to the Treasury in her chair. I know that she also brings vast expertise and experience to this debate from both her time in this place and prior to it. For those reasons, I will humbly keep a short focus on five particular segments of potential retail investors in my remarks.

My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley was very accurate in noting the focus of the debate. For me in the Vale of Glamorgan, as will be the case for many other colleagues, the focus must be on ensuring that individuals can not only accumulate prosperity through retail investment but ensure dignity, and that is the first segment of particular interest. For millions of households, retail investment is a question of saving up for a rainy day. For many households in the third decile of wealth in this country, with average net financial savings of about £1,500, the path to retail investment is through a low-cost—or hopefully even a zero-cost—accessible money market or index fund. The fundamental focus for those individuals is on how we support not just the right level of interest rate provision from our retail banks, which is absolutely necessary, but the advantages of technology in distributing index funds in a way that is accessible and understandable to many of those households.

The secondary category is novel in its composition: the young in this country. While about 39% of adults in this country have invested actively, an overwhelming third of those started during the pandemic. The vast majority of those who started in the pandemic and afterwards are aged between 18 and 34. The patterns of behaviour in that category are radically different from others across the country: 58% of 18 to 24-year-olds hold cryptocurrency as their primary asset holding; among those aged between 55 and 65, holdings in that asset class are negligible. Cash ISAs are not particularly prominent for those young individuals at the moment.

For them, the interesting and salient question is how to make sure that we have a bridge to wider responsible investing across asset classes, which builds for the long term, alongside doing what they want in holding cryptocurrency or other assets.

The third category is critical to the nation's future and private investment in this country: those who do not invest in equity today. My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley has come up with a series of good practical ideas on supporting them into equity markets, but given that most of our financial assets up until the seventh or eighth decile of wealth lie in pensions rather than direct financial assets themselves, I feel that pensions will be the primary gateway to ensuring that retail investors have a bit more of a say in allocation that supports the country's long-term goals.

In the United States a 401(k) culture of people being able to exercise discretion in what happens with their pensions has led to a radical shift in retail holding in equities in particular. The Economic Secretary to the Treasury has been at the frontier of making reforms to our pension system in her prior role and now as well. In addition to supporting funds, shifting their allocation, really pushing ambition on the implementation of the pensions dashboard and in the movement to open pensions, the data, transparency and empowered control that will help many of us to make greater moves into supporting British and wider businesses is fundamental.

Anna Dixon: My hon. Friend makes excellent points about the older generation and their decision making on what to invest in. At the moment older people are often over-saving, particularly in cash ISAs or very low-risk products, because of the lack of funded social care. They are having to hold on to a lot of cash just in case they need to pay for care. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that better advice is needed for pensioners to make retail investment decisions, and a better range of products is needed that will deliver them security in old age in terms of social care, but also the returns in pension income?

Kanishka Narayan: Yes, absolutely. My hon. Friend speaks with a great deal of expertise on this and on the wider question of how we support people with care needs. She is exactly right.

I would be interested in how we support a market in the advice context that goes all the way from what I think the guidance on the boundary of the advice market will do, which is support people getting into the advice context in the first place and ultimately into the regulated part of that market. Again, as a fervent believer in what a reduced cost of delivery through technology can do, I think there is a huge amount of progress to be made in finding different sources of advice for different sets of people. Pensions are a primary point of leverage as we think about where we can make a mark in supporting greater retail investment.

There is a fourth, really important category of those who invest in equities, but do not invest as much in British equities. It is worth distinguishing them from those who do not invest in equities altogether. My broad suggestion there is that we focus as much on the pull as the push and think about why it is that when people in Britain invest in equities, they are not investing as much in British equities. It is very clear that North

American funds have had very material inflows over the course of the last decade, compared with actively managed UK funds, which have had outflows since 2016. UK-based index funds also had outflows in the two years prior to 2023. It is probably not surprising that it is in large part down to the returns profile.

If someone invested in the MSCI USA Index, they got a 303% return over the last decade. Return in the MSCI World Index was 213%. If we look at the pattern of retail investment in US companies, we see that it is the highest growth, highest returning and often in some ways the highest engagement companies that get the greatest inflows. Some 30% of retail holdings in the “magnificent seven” tech stocks, as they are labelled, are radically lower in the rest of the S&P. Given that the median age of our top 10 companies in the FTSE is about 150 compared with 40 in the US top 10, it is probably not surprising that people do not feel as captivated by the possibility of investing in Britain.

When we think about retail investment in British assets in particular, we need to think about what we are asking people to invest in and make sure that the wider set of economic reforms that we are focused on are driving at pace a sense that technology and renewable energy—things that build the country’s future—grounded in communities like Hexham and the Vale of Glamorgan are the assets that we support people to invest in.

My final point is close to my heart as a Labour politician, which is that retail investors’ primary experience of a company is the company that they work in. There is a cause here that ties together the cause of worker dignity, worker engagement and retail investment for prosperity. It is a cause close to my heart from the technology sector, because the one thing that has been so remarkable about it globally has been the ability of the technology sector to create prosperity through employee stock ownership. I humbly suggest that the Government consider adapting a very successful enterprise management incentive scheme for employee stock ownership, to make it more attractive in the modern world of technology and artificial intelligence companies.

I am conscious that I have whizzed through those five categories, but at the heart of the issue is a fundamental focus: in supporting both the prosperity and dignity of people in the Vale of Glamorgan and across the country, retail investment will be fundamental.

5 pm

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): May I start by being a little off topic? This is my first opportunity to congratulate you in person, Mrs Hobhouse, on your heartwarming reunion with your family. Congratulations—that was delightful to see over the Easter weekend.

I start by congratulating the hon. Member for Buckingham and Bletchley (Callum Anderson) on securing this incredibly important debate. As he highlighted, the UK has history and status as a global financial centre. We have a reputation for being very strong at securing international investment, but domestic investment has never always been quite as strong. The domestic investment that we do have is often propped up by pension auto-enrolment. That masks the fact that the share of UK wealth in company stocks is the lowest in the G7 and, as hon. Members have highlighted, it is lower now than it used to be.

The net effect is that individuals are missing out on financial returns and on having a stake in our economy, and companies are missing out on investment. That leads many companies to choose not to list here in the UK; they list in other countries where they can secure higher valuations and more capital investment. Other Members have rehearsed some of the reasons for that. Some individuals cannot afford, or feel that they cannot afford, to invest, while others are risk-averse. There are those who lack the knowledge or confidence about how to invest. Some choose to invest in property: house prices and building prices in this country continue to go up and up, and that often means that people choose to invest in that.

As has been highlighted, people are often saving for a rainy day. Our public services remain on their knees, so individuals and families are increasingly saving money, whether for social care, knee operations, private education, healthcare assessments or mental health appointments. Clearly, we need get our public services back on their feet. Boosting people’s confidence in public services will convince them that they will not have to pay out when they should be relying on public services.

We have seen many moves by different agencies to address some of these problems. The Financial Conduct Authority is looking to offer more than just generic guidance on how to invest, and we can all welcome that. Some banks are calling for a badging scheme to identify entry-level investment products. I think we can all welcome that as well, particularly long-term, low-risk investments for those people who want to get going. I am sure that, irrespective of political party, we can agree with calls for greater financial literacy. It is vital that we do more on all these fronts because people are missing out on financial returns and companies are missing out on investment and choosing to go elsewhere.

I was particularly interested in some of the recommendations and calls for action from the hon. Member for Buckingham and Bletchley. I wholeheartedly agree with his call for a long-term retail investment strategy, and I hope that the Minister will say a little more about that. I urge some caution around the call to simplify the four ISAs. Many individuals are fairly au fait with choice, and choice in itself is a good thing. People have more agency when they can choose between different products, and I would be wary about throwing the baby out with the bathwater; if more information is available about the differences between the ISAs, choice is a good thing.

Increasingly, people want to choose how they invest their money. They may want to invest in a particular sector. They may want to make investments in line with their outlook on the world, whether those are green investments or something that has another impact. Some people are willing to sacrifice a bit of financial return if they feel they are using their money for a good cause. I urge the Government and colleagues to reflect on that point. I am interested in the calls to revisit tax exemptions so that we incentivise people to invest in companies that genuinely contribute to building Britain and the British economy and to providing more secure jobs. In addition to the financial literacy, that call for a campaign to, effectively, democratise investment is a really good idea. We Liberal Democrats would be keen to hear more from the Government on that point.

[Daisy Cooper]

On green investment, we know there is a green stocks and shares ISA. The Government have talked about a social impact investment vehicle; it would be interesting to hear whether they have more to say on that, perhaps before we get to the spending review. I urge the Government to consider tackling crypto scams. We see warnings on an almost weekly basis about such scams, and we would like the Government to do more to tackle them, especially on social media platforms, and guarantee that protections would not be watered down in any future Trump trade deal. We need to see greater stability more generally, of course.

I also urge the Government to consider more long-term, responsible investment opportunities for individuals. At the moment, a lot of people's confidence in retail investment might be a little shaken because of global headwinds and the geopolitical situation that. None the less, there is still a very strong argument for longer-term investment, and the rewards that can provide.

Finally, I have a comment for the Minister in the spirit of constructive opposition: there are lots of rumours flying around at the moment about whether and how the Government may change various ISAs, and whether they are looking at a particular cap, and that has created a little uncertainty. I have heard from a few constituents anxious about what the changes might be, and what they might mean for them. We all want to make sure that our constituents are well informed and do not take rash decisions because of rumours they have heard, so I urge the Minister to assure us that whatever plans the Government may bring forward will be phased in and that people have no cause to panic or be anxious about what may change. Such reassurances would be well received by some of our constituents.

5.7 pm

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your leadership, Mrs Hobhouse, and I congratulate you on your first Westminster Hall debate as a member of the Panel of Chairs—you have handled it masterfully. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Buckingham and Bletchley (Callum Anderson) on securing this debate. He previously worked for the London stock exchange; he may be interested to know that I started my 27-year investment career as a dealer on the floor of the exchange in what we like to refer to as “the olden days”. There will be an almost unanimous outbreak of agreement across the Chamber. The hon. Member made some very important points. There is one point on which I slightly disagree, but he could basically have written my speech.

One of the things that the hon. Member mentioned is the idea of acclimatising people to the idea of investment. When I was first elected as an MP, a number of us spearheaded a campaign to get investing and financial education into the national curriculum. At the time, it was clear that too many young people were leaving school without any understanding of the basics of personal finance, let alone the potential of sensible long-term investment. Whether it is saving for a rainy day or putting away money to buy a home, making the right investment choices is absolutely vital. Retail investment should absolutely form a cornerstone of any investment

strategy, but not enough people are aware of the long-term benefits of stocks and shares investment versus cash deposits.

Polling conducted by Opinium last year highlighted that fewer than half of respondents felt confident about opening a stocks and shares ISA. I have always felt that the lack of knowledge starts with the lack of the right education. Better financial education was recommended by the Parliamentary Commission on Banking Standards when I was on it over a decade ago—a long time before many Members here were elected. In 2014, I thought we had finally settled the debate about financial education in the curriculum. The national curriculum was updated to see financial education become a statutory part of it for the first time. Although it is still on the national curriculum, it has become clear that there is not enough focus on getting schools to teach it consistently. Academy schools that do not follow the curriculum have no requirement to teach financial education if they choose not to.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) for recently taking up the baton. His private Member's Bill would make financial education mandatory for all students aged five to 18, which could resolve some of the issues we are debating here.

Of course, things have moved on since my original campaign. It is clear that there is a real appetite for young people to become investors. Although the UK continues to lag behind countries like the United States when it comes to active retail investment, since the pandemic interest in investing has substantially risen among younger age groups, particularly Gen Z. That has partly been driven by cryptoasset investment, which, if I am being entirely honest, is something I find a bit odd.

Younger investors aged between 18 and 24 are more likely than older investors to invest in cryptoassets. A survey carried out by the Financial Conduct Authority showed that 46% of young investors report holding cryptocurrencies compared with just 7% of investors aged 55 to 65. They are influenced by trends they see on social media such as TikTok, with cryptocurrency influencers bragging about fabulous returns—of course, there are fabulous losses as well. The bedrock of financial education is the old adage, “If it is too good to be true, then it probably is.” I am not against investment in cryptoassets, but as any good investor knows they should be seen as part of a balanced portfolio. Any young people with an appetite for taking investment risks should know that they could be better served with investments into the stock market rather than in the volatility of cryptotrading.

I hope the Minister will outline how the Government intend to get our schools teaching financial education. Will she confirm whether the Government support the principles set out in the Financial Education Bill, which has had cross-party support?

Online trading platforms have now made it easier than ever to become an investor. Despite the easy accessibility, the FCA's 2022 Financial Lives survey showed that while more than 15 million adults in the UK have investable assets exceeding £10,000, more than half hold at least 75% of those assets in cash. There are very good reasons to hold cash, particularly as people get towards retirement age or want to divest to buy a

property or a car. It is for that reason that we believe it is important to retain the individual choice of how to use a tax-free ISA and keep its current allowance unchanged. There is another important point about cash ISAs. They provide substantial capital for building societies, which use the capital to lend on in the form of mortgages. If we reduce the amount of money that can go into cash ISA, we potentially reduce the amount of money available to the mortgage market. We need to think in a balanced way.

There are other ways to focus the minds of people, helping them to make better investment decisions, while retaining the flexibility to spend their ISA in their and their families' best interests. The Investment Association has called for cash products to come with risk warnings, in the same way as all financial products. That could be as simple as comparing the quoted savings rates against inflation—a point the hon. Member for Buckingham and Bletchley made. In that way, an investor would know that their investment could in fact be losing money in real terms versus inflation. Just as we rightly warn investors that markets can go down as well as up, we should also be honest that holding cash, while it may feel safe, risks steadily losing value through inflation.

The Investment Association has also suggested that renaming the stocks and shares ISA the investment ISA could be a way of changing the mindset of investors. I would welcome the Minister's thoughts on how we can highlight to investors the pitfalls of holding long-term cash. A successful hearts and minds campaign could, according to estimates from Aberdeen, unlock £3.5 trillion of capital for markets, if UK adults held as much wealth in investments as their US peers. That clearly raises another question: how do we encourage retail investment into UK stocks and shares?

If we are serious about encouraging long-term investment and wider public participation in the UK's capital markets, we must take a hard look at stamp duty on shares—again, the hon. Member for Buckingham and Bletchley made that point. At 50 basis points, the UK has one of the highest rates of this kind of transaction tax in the developed world. We should not be taxing investment in British businesses; we should be incentivising it.

Stamp duty creates a direct disincentive to buy UK shares and disproportionately impacts those investing smaller amounts, for whom every pound counts. It also reduces the attractiveness of London as a global listing destination and adds friction to the secondary market, which ultimately feeds back into the cost of capital for UK firms. In short, stamp duty is a tax on growth, on participation and on financial inclusion. We need to ask ourselves whether that levy, introduced in a very different era, still serves a useful purpose, or whether reform could help us to unlock a stronger culture of long-term share ownership in this country. I ask the Minister to consider whether the tax could be looked at again, particularly for retail investors.

As an idea, perhaps we could also look again at how the ISA tax-free allowance could be incentivised to stay in the UK. I recently spoke to a successful investor, someone who makes full use of his £20,000 annual stocks and shares ISA allowance. As one would expect, he is shrewd with his money, putting it where he believes it will deliver the best returns. In recent years, that has meant investing primarily in the American markets, where growth has outpaced much of what has been available here in the UK. What struck me was a comment

he made a little later about his gardener, who is on minimum wage. The gardener can only afford to put a tiny amount of money, if anything, each month into a cash ISA; yet through his taxes he is effectively subsidising a tax break that allows his employer to invest tax-free in overseas companies. That does not feel right, and it is another point also made by the hon. Member for Buckingham and Bletchley.

ISAs are a cornerstone of our savings culture, but if they are primarily being used to funnel capital abroad, it is time we asked ourselves whether the current system is doing what we intended it to do. Perhaps it is time to explore how we can better direct ISA investment towards British companies. I am sure the Minister will be addressing that subject in her speech.

I think we are all in wholehearted agreement on the need for more retail investment in the UK. The opportunity for investment into UK companies is substantial if we can get it right. I am sure the Minister will have a plethora of ideas—she is writing them down ferociously as I speak—and we look forward to hearing what she has to say.

5.16 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Emma Reynolds): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse; congratulations on your appointment to the Panel. Thank you for presiding over this very good-natured Westminster Hall debate. I wish everybody a happy Easter—I do not know about everybody else, but for me, it is the first day back from a nice Easter break. I hope people got some rest over recess, and lots of Easter eggs to boot.

I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley (Callum Anderson) on securing this debate. He brings great expertise to the House on the issue and many others, and it is great to respond to his thoughtful contribution. He was right to draw attention to the benefits of retail investors to consumers and the country as a whole. As he said, it is a win-win situation: if we get this right, it will benefit savers, who will get better returns, and it will bring benefits to British business by unlocking more capital to boost economic growth. I will shortly respond to the four points that he raised.

Before I do that, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) for his thoughtful contribution. He spoke about the lack of financial education and targeted support for entrepreneurs in rural areas. Like him, I want to ensure that our Government, in our drive to increase economic growth, pursue that in a way that brings about inclusive growth, across the country, in urban and rural areas. I heard what he said about access to cash; I was not in the privileged position of Minister when he secured his Adjournment debate on that issue, but if he would like to meet to discuss it, I would be happy to do that, because it is obviously a concern in his constituency.

I also pay tribute to an excellent speech, as ever, from my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Kanishka Narayan), who talked about five categories; I will not go through them all, but I am passionate about the pensions dashboard, having worked on it in my previous ministerial position. It could be game changing in terms of ensuring greater visibility. He rightly said that many people, even if they are not

[Emma Reynolds]

directly invested in the stock market, are invested via their pensions. The dashboard will give them much greater awareness of what they are invested in, what their likely pension income will be in the future, and what they might need to do to top that pension up. I was interested to hear what he said about that and about the culture of investing in North America—but I have a section about that at the end of my speech, so I will not pre-empt it.

I thank the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper), who rightly said that London and the UK are a strong international financial centre. We should celebrate the fact that we attract a lot of investment from international investors, including international pension funds and others. She and my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley both noted that the amount that our own pension funds and investors invest in the UK has decreased, which is worrying.

I thank the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) for his many, many questions—I am giving some thought to them as I proceed. He was absolutely correct to say that people think there is a risk to investing in stocks and shares, but particularly in a high-inflation environment—we are not in one now, but in recent memory inflation got as high as 11%—holding savings in cash is not a risk-free option, because inflation will erode the value of the money over time. If people have additional cash above the rainy day savings that the hon. Member for St Albans talked about, there is some merit to looking at what they might do to invest for the long term. Members from across the House talked about long-term investing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley set out the scale of the challenge and the potential opportunities. As he noted, the UK is an outlier compared with our international peers. He rightly said that the UK is the third worst in the G7—that is probably the simplest way of putting it—in terms of the amount of money that people hold in cash, over everything else. We are behind only Germany and Japan in terms of the amount of cash that people hold in savings. Do not get me wrong; we know there is a role for cash savings, but we have to look at the balance between saving in cash and investing in equities. The research by Aberdeen found that, within the G7, UK consumers have the lowest appetite for investing, which is very concerning.

Many of us hold all or almost all of our savings in cash. The Financial Conduct Authority reported in 2023 that almost 12 million consumers had more than £10,000 in investible assets held mostly or entirely in cash. Of that group, more than 5 million indicated some appetite to invest. I suppose our job as a Government, and as parliamentarians, is to look at what we can do to give people confidence to take that first step into investing.

Of course, the Government understand that people need cash savings for a rainy day buffer. Many of us have those; I lost my seat in 2019, and thankfully I had a cash buffer at that time. Beyond that, there are risks to holding more savings in cash, as I have suggested, given the impact of inflation, and there is an opportunity cost of holding money in cash savings when there are higher returns to be had from investing, and particularly investing in the long term, if that is open to individuals.

The Government want more people to take part in capital markets. The hon. Member for St Albans talked about democratising capital markets—I like that phrase; it is a good thing that we can all agree on—and about the benefits from the returns and long-term financial security that investing in those markets can provide. To make that happen, we need to build a stronger investment environment in this country, and a better investment culture that helps people to engage confidently with investing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley made four policy suggestions, which were also mentioned by other hon. Members. I will address in turn. First, he called for reform of the ISA system. There was some debate across the House; there was mostly cross-party support for that proposal, but it was nice to see some discussion and constructive disagreement between the Liberal Democrats and my hon. Friend. He suggested that we should consolidate and simplify ISAs, while the hon. Member for St Albans suggested that we should ensure the choice remains available.

We said in the spring statement that we are looking at options for reforming ISAs to get the balance right between cash and equities. I cannot comment on any tax changes or changes to the ISA or savings landscape today, but I can say to the hon. Lady that we will take representations into account very seriously. I will say—I think for the third time in this speech—that cash savings obviously play an important role in ensuring that people have a financial buffer in case something goes wrong.

Daisy Cooper: I recognise that the Minister will not accept my invitation to divulge more information about the Government's thinking on this issue, but I would be grateful if she could at least confirm that the Government's position is that they are not ruling out a phased approach to introducing whatever they may introduce. It is important that our constituents who are anxious and worried about their money and what they should be doing with it, and who are currently consulting with financial advisers and whatnot, are given the reassurance they need that whatever changes the Government introduce will be phased in a way that makes it easy for them to make decisions, and that they should not make snap decisions now.

Emma Reynolds: I have heard the hon. Lady's representation, and I am sure that people in the Treasury hear that representation. I would mention to her more broadly that we have committed to one fiscal event a year, rather than the two or three that we might have seen from the previous Government—we might have got a third one in September, had we not had an early election. I hope that gives her some reassurance.

The hon. Member for Wyre Forest mentioned the issue of building societies, which he also raised with me in the House in Treasury questions. I am in close touch with the building societies and will be speaking at their conference in Birmingham—he might be too, as a west midlands MP; I do not know. I can reassure him that we are in close engagement with them and that we understand and appreciate the valuable role that they play in providing mortgages and other financial assistance to their members. Many of us in this place will be members of and have investments in different building societies.

Anna Dixon: Constituents of mine value the role of the credit union, and the Bradford credit union in particular, for small savers on low incomes. Does the Minister see a role for credit unions alongside building societies in helping to encourage not only saving, but making early steps into investment, as we have discussed in this debate, for some of our poorest constituents?

Emma Reynolds: Credit unions, mutuals and co-operatives play a hugely important role in our economy and our society. That is why the Government—as my hon. Friend will know, given that she stood on the same Labour manifesto as me—promised in our manifesto to double the size of the mutuals sector, why the Chancellor asked the FCA and the Prudential Regulation Authority to look at the mutuals landscape in the Mansion House speech in November and why we have supported the establishment of the co-operatives and mutuals council—I actually went to the first meeting. As my hon. Friend said, credit unions play an important role in encouraging savings, particularly for those on low incomes. We have also launched a consultation on whether the common bond needs to be more flexible so that more people can benefit from credit unions, and that is also in train.

Coming back to the issue of ISA reform, the hon. Member for St Albans rightly said that there has been some market volatility recently. I will not comment on the day-to-day movement in markets, but I will say—I think she was also making this point—that if people are in a position where they can invest in stocks and shares in our stock market or other forms of investment, they need to take a long-term view of that. Often, that investment gives better returns than just putting something away into a cash account.

Analysis by AJ Bell from February this year suggests that someone who put away £1,000 in an average-performing cash ISA every April since their introduction in 1999 would now hold about £34,000. If their savings had instead kept up with inflation, they would now have £38,000, so that person would have lost out on £4,000. That goes to show how inflation can reduce the value of cash savings over time. In contrast, if that same individual had decided to invest in a stocks and shares ISA, they could now have around £83,000—over twice as much as their cash savings would have been. That demonstrates that if someone has the confidence and the ability—we are not talking about everybody here—to invest for the longer term, they will most likely get a better return. We need to ensure that people have the confidence and ability to engage with investing, and thus to benefit from the financial security and greater returns that investing can often provide.

My hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan talked about people on lower incomes. On that, I will take the opportunity to say something about the help to save scheme, which is targeted at working households on low incomes. It offers a 50% Government bonus on savings of up to £50 a month over four years. The Government announced at the autumn Budget last year that the help to save scheme has been extended until April 2027. From 6 April this year, we have extended eligibility for help to save to all universal credit claimants in work as well.

The second issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley was about financial education. In fact, most hon. Members who spoke

talked about its importance. One of the major barriers to investing for consumers is a lack of support to make financial decisions. We know that only 8% of adults received regulated financial advice in the 12 months to May 2022, but guidance does not often go far enough to help consumers feel confident to make a decision. We have a big advice/guidance boundary gap. Many of our constituents are therefore not getting the help they need to make their money go further. Some keep a lot of their money in savings, losing out on potential returns, and others do not regularly review their investments, or invest in products that do not meet their risk appetite.

Together with the FCA, the Government are developing a new regime called targeted support, which would allow regulated firms to provide suggestions appropriate to consumers with similar characteristics. For instance, the regime would enable firms to suggest that an individual with substantial savings could consider opening a stocks and shares ISA. It would also enable firms to suggest options for how to generate an income from an individual's pension pot, appropriate to consumers with similar needs. The FCA will consult on the rules that will underpin targeted support in the first half of this year. Getting those reforms right will help consumers make better-informed decisions, engage in capital markets, and ultimately to be in a position to get better returns on their savings in the longer term.

My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley reflected on how financial education can help level the playing field for those from less wealthy backgrounds. I really liked how he expressed in his speech the asymmetry between those who already come from a wealthy background, where this might even be discussed at the dinner table, and those in a less privileged position, who are not aware of some of the opportunities. If they are not aware, even if they were given the opportunity they would not have the confidence to take it.

In England, the independent curriculum and assessment review is considering how to ensure that the curriculum is fit for purpose. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Wyre Forest, talked about the importance of financial education. I cannot give him any guarantees right now, because as he will know, although we have had the interim report of the curriculum review, we are still working through some of the details. I met the Minister for School Standards to discuss this work and to make sure that my work on financial inclusion and the work of the curriculum review go hand in hand. I cannot give him any guarantees on private Member's Bills right now, but I can take the question back to the Government Whips, who will tell me where we are. As I understand it, the private Member's Bill on financial education that he talked about is not due to be introduced until 11 July.

We are working with the Department for Education, and the Department for Education is working across Government on how we can ensure that the curriculum review improves financial education for our young people, which I would like to see. Indeed, it was striking that in the interim review parents and pupils said that finance and budgeting was the top area they would like to see more focus on in schools; that was encouraging.

Thirdly, my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley asked for action to make it easier for our citizens to engage with our capital markets. The importance of UK capital markets was mentioned by many speakers,

[Emma Reynolds]

but particularly by the hon. Member for St Albans, my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan and the shadow Minister. We want to make UK capital markets as attractive as possible to retail investors. Our capital markets are already among the strongest and deepest globally. I know some concerns have been raised, but more than £25 billion of equity capital was raised in London last year, more than in the next three European exchanges combined. I am keen that we do not talk ourselves down. Of course, we must recognise challenges where they arise, but we must also recognise our strengths. We are the world's largest international bond market, with more than 16,000 active bonds traded on our markets, representing over £4.1 trillion across 55 currencies.

We want to go further to reinvigorate capital markets to ensure that they support both UK and global growth. We are currently developing a financial services growth and competitiveness strategy, and have identified capital markets, and retail participation within those markets, as a priority growth opportunity in that strategy. That strategy will come later this year, and I am sure the hon. Member for Wyre Forest will quiz me about it in the weeks and months to come.

The Government are focused on making our markets more competitive, including by supporting the FCA's work to reform the UK's prospectus regime to give investors access to better quality information to support their decision making, and supporting the FCA's proposals to cut red tape for corporate bond issuance, which will encourage companies listed on stock exchanges to offer bonds in smaller sizes to improve investment opportunities for retail investors. The Government have also legislated to enable the FCA to reform the UK's retail disclosure regime to ensure that consumers have access to the most useful information to support their investment decisions. The FCA's consultation has just closed and the Government look forward to seeing its final rules later this year.

My hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley also raised the work of the industry-led digitisation taskforce, which is looking at how we can improve the system of share ownership in this country and, as part of that work, at how we can remove all paper shares. The taskforce is currently finalising its final report—my hon. Friend will have seen the interim report—and the Government look forward to receiving it, and will respond in due course.

Finally, my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley called for a fundamental shift in how we think about investing in our country. He is right to say that investing should not be for just the wealthy, or those with expertise; we need to build an investment culture that enables newcomers to invest confidently and grow their financial resilience. I want to deliver that change but I know that the Government, and indeed parliamentarians, cannot deliver that shift on our own. We need to work closely with regulators and industry and, as my hon. Friend suggests, make the case to consumers for investing. I thank my hon. Friend for outlining his proposal for how we could do that.

We are thinking carefully about these matters and look forward to working with my hon. Friend and others across the House to help build the strong investment culture that we want. As part of that work, we are of course looking at international examples; the shadow

Minister mentioned the importance of that. Many hon. Members will be familiar with how Americans talk a lot about their 401(k)—or so I am told—and how Australians talk a lot about their super. A few months ago, I was talking to a financial services senior leader who told me that when she lived in Australia, her cleaner often looked at her super on her phone, and tracked the return on her investment. I would love to see that sort of inclusive, democratic access to investment opportunities in the UK. I am not being patronising—I have a fantastic cleaner too, and I would like to see her in that position. We want to ensure that people across society get these opportunities. We also want people to engage with their pensions more closely, as I have already mentioned in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan.

If I do not get to all the questions raised by the hon. Member for Wyre Forest then I am sure that I can write to him, or we can have a discussion after the debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan talked about what the Government could do to promote employee share ownership. The previous Government launched a call for evidence on the save as you earn and share incentive plan schemes. The Government will use that call for evidence to consider opportunities to improve those schemes, and I thank my hon. Friend for his interest in that.

The hon. Member for St Albans talked about advertising on social media. She will know that under the Online Safety Act 2023 large internet platforms will be required to put in place systems and controls to avoid fraudulent advertising appearing on those platforms. We also welcome Ofcom's work to bring forward codes of practice on what actions firms should be considering. However, she is right to raise the issue as a matter of concern; the Government are concerned about it.

I have answered the question from the hon. Member for Wyre Forest about the private Member's Bill on financial education, but I am sure that he asked me other questions that I have not quite got round to; I beg his forgiveness. I also answered his question on what we can do together to ensure that people know there are risks involved with holding cash above certain levels, and about the erosion of people's cash savings by inflation, but if he wants to repeat any of the other questions, I am happy to respond.

Mark Garnier: I think the Minister has covered most of my questions, but I will review and we can perhaps have a conversation later.

Emma Reynolds: Such great cross-party working—do not tell anyone else about it! It is really good to work with the hon. Gentleman. I remember fondly—well, not that fondly—being a shadow Minister and having very good, if different, working relationships with the Ministers who I shadowed. I very much welcome the constructive way in which he has contributed to the debate and I look forward to Thursday, when we will debate the Bank Resolution (Recapitalisation) Bill.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Buckingham and Bletchley for securing this debate and I also thank all the hon. Members who spoke. It has been a very constructive and interesting debate, certainly from my perspective, and I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. The Government are determined to make

the UK's retail investing environment more attractive and to boost the UK's investment culture, and I will reflect carefully on the points raised.

5.41 pm

Callum Anderson: I had no idea, Mrs Hobhouse, that this was the first Westminster Hall debate that you have chaired. Given that we have 20 minutes left, hopefully this is the start of a good track record for you of ending debates in time.

Once again, I am really grateful for the opportunity to bring the debate to Westminster Hall, and to the Members from all parts of the political spectrum who have contributed in a thoughtful and considered way. And as I said at the beginning, I thank the Minister for her continued engagement and patience with me as I bring the issue up again and again. Clearly, there is a lot of cross-party political consensus. There is therefore a big opportunity for Britain to reinvigorate our capital markets and, as the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper) said, to ensure we can democratise share ownership. I again thank everybody for spending an hour of their time contributing to the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government support for retail investment.

5.43 pm

Sitting suspended.

Point of Order

6 pm

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): On a point of order, Mrs Hobhouse. On 25 March, in a Westminster Hall debate on the subject of construction standards for new build homes, I made a reference to PR Power Saving Solutions Ltd. I should have drawn attention at that time to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, in which I record a campaign donation from that company. I apologise to you, and to the House, for that oversight, and I am grateful for the opportunity to correct the record.

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order. He has put his correction on the record.

Automation: Economic Benefits

6.1 pm

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential merits of automation for the economy.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I do not want to sound too dramatic, but hon. Members should know that this is an historic debate: it is the first time, to my knowledge, that automation specifically has been debated in Westminster Hall, and perhaps even in Parliament. This will also perhaps be the first speech in rather a long time about business and innovation not to focus solely on AI, which I am sure is a relief to us all.

I am going to argue that automation is not a threat to the UK economy; it is one of the greatest untapped opportunities that we have. From boosting productivity to creating high-quality and high-skilled jobs, automation can power our growth, competitiveness and resilience, but for reasons that I will touch on, and which I would be grateful for colleagues' views on, the UK is, unlike in so many other areas, sadly not yet a world leader. Before I get too far into my speech, let me define automation as the action or process of introducing automatic equipment or devices into a manufacturing or other process or facility. It is not just about robotic arms.

There are a few problems relating to automation. One of them, at the most basic level, is that automation—robotics—conjures up deep-set primordial fears in many people. It is the fear of the march of the robots, of Terminator, and perhaps at a less hyperbolic level, of machines taking our jobs, particularly in manufacturing. Perhaps even in this place we fear automatons taking over our roles as Members of Parliament. I will argue strongly against such fear regarding automation.

I want to dispel the myth about robots stealing jobs. It simply does not stack up. In the UK, unemployment sits at 4.4%, similar to the US, where it is about 4.2%, but the United States has 300 robots per 10,000 workers—more than double the UK's figure. The same is true for Japan, where the unemployment rate was just 2.4% in February 2025, despite its having 419 robots per 10,000 workers. In South Korea, the trend continues: unemployment stood at 2.9% in March 2025, even with an impressive 1,012 robots per 10,000 workers. Automation replaces tasks, not people, and in so doing it creates better-paid, more fulfilling jobs.

The current situation in the UK, according to the latest International Federation of Robotics figures, shows just how far British manufacturing has to climb in terms of automation adoption. The UK is now 23rd in the global robot density league table—that is not a phrase that I thought I would necessarily read out in the House, but I have just done so—with 119 robots per 10,000 workers, compared with a global average of 162. We have also dropped out of the top 10 global manufacturing nations, sadly; we are now in 12th place. Our global competitors are investing heavily in productivity. Sadly, in too many cases, we are falling behind, notwithstanding the excellent work of the Minister and the Government in this regard.

The UK is lagging behind for three main reasons: first, a reluctance to invest in capital equipment; secondly, perceptions of complexity and high up-front costs around

robotics and automation; and thirdly, a lack of confidence and clear guidance, especially among small and medium-sized enterprises. Both Automate UK and the Manufacturing Technologies Association have highlighted that investment and confidence gap.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): As my hon. Friend says, productivity in this country has flatlined since 2008. It is great that he has secured this debate, because productivity is one of my pet subjects, and as he has said, the Manufacturing Technology Centre is doing some fantastic work. I am sure he will have seen the video last week of Chinese robots running a marathon—what an extraordinary sight that was. Does he agree that while we need to develop all sorts of policies, fiscal incentives are key to getting the investment that businesses need to deliver on increasing robotisation and automation?

John Slinger: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I am hopeful that the Minister will refer to some of the measures that the Government can take, and are already taking, to increase productivity. I must say, as someone who is running the London marathon on Sunday, I am slightly worried about the rapid rise of robots in that particular field—I am certainly going to beat any that I see.

The Manufacturing Technologies Association is calling for Government leadership to break down the barriers and deliver a national framework to accelerate adoption. While knocking on doors, which I am sure many colleagues were also doing over the Easter break, I met a young entrepreneur who has a small robotics and automation systems business. He wanted to expand but was not aware of what finance was available to make the capital investments he needed, nor of how he might take on an apprentice or two. I helped as far as I could as an MP by signposting him to the right people, but it shows a lack of cut-through regarding support for automation.

I have seen the potential of automation first hand on visits to companies like FANUC UK, in my constituency, part of a high-tech cluster at Ansty Park, which also includes the London Electric Vehicle Company and the Manufacturing Technology Centre, or the MTC, which I am proud to represent and champion here. I have seen how automation transforms jobs, shifting roles towards programming, maintenance and process design. I have also witnessed, first hand, how automation—due to its requirement for high-skilled workers—stimulates company investment in skills development, with apprenticeship programmes, outreach to schools and sponsorship of competitions. FANUC UK is a long-standing sponsor of the WorldSkills UK industrial robotics competition.

I have met apprentices at FANUC, the MTC and elsewhere, and seen their excitement and enthusiasm—as I am sure colleagues across the House have—when meeting young people who are training to become the masters of machines, unleashing economic potential and enabling new innovations to be born and grow. The MTC, which forms one of nine Government-backed Catapult centres that bring together industry and academia to turbocharge innovation and solutions—its progenitor being my noble Friend, Lord Mandelson—even runs an education campus. The generous sponsorship of £15 million over 15 years by Lloyds Bank has enabled it to offer numerous apprenticeship programmes that cater for our most innovative companies.

Another concern raised with me by businesses I have visited is that companies do not want, or are unable, to invest in automation and therefore cannot expand to meet the demand for their products and services. However, some solutions are already under way. In addition to the excellent work of FANUC UK in my constituency, the MTC is taking a leading role in the debate about automation, and having an effect. It is providing independent advice to help businesses on their first automation journey, and has opened a new robot experience centre, giving companies the chance to test, trial and learn in a risk-free space.

The MTC is also focused on upskilling and reskilling, with targeted workforce development especially for SMEs, which are, of course, the backbone of our economy. It is also driving the west midlands robotics and autonomous systems cluster, helping to build a strong regional ecosystem. There are lots of phrases that I am quite surprised to be saying, but none the less, this is the kind of support businesses need—and it is replicable at scale.

There is a huge prize available to the UK. Make UK estimates that if we scale up our SME manufacturers, we could add £83 billion to our manufacturing output—lifting us to seventh in the world rankings. To deliver that, we must double our robotics adoption by 2030.

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I represent a constituency with a long and proud tradition of manufacturing heritage. While discussions on automation usually focus on AI, I am grateful to my hon. Friend for recognising the importance of robotics in this sector. The UK lags behind its global competitors in robot density; we are the lowest among the G7 nations. That gap reflects missed opportunities for productivity and growth. Does he agree that it is vital we invest in robotics to rejuvenate our manufacturing base, create high-skilled jobs and apprenticeships across the west midlands, and back projects such as the green innovation corridor in Wolverhampton North East to secure our place as global leaders?

John Slinger: I wholeheartedly agree. Automation and robotics are really just a modern tool, and we would not be against businesses and manufacturers using the most effective tools. It is vital that they are able to adopt this particular form of tool to enable them to develop the most innovative products that can drive our economy in the west midlands, which I know my hon. Friend and I agree is vital for our region, and for the UK more widely.

In our constituencies, people young and old have the aspiration to utilise automation to chart new manufacturing territory. Notwithstanding the excellent work of organisations such as those I have already mentioned, of the local chamber of commerce, which I have met, or of local councils such as Rugby borough council and its new business hub in the town hall, or indeed the excellent work of the Minister and his colleagues, there is more to be done to educate people about the benefits of automation and provide the ecosystem needed, with more skills, training, grants and networking opportunities—and through this, to empower people.

I urge the Minister to work on a clear road map to match our competitor industrialised nations on robotics and automation with specific attention to SMEs, which make up 95% of UK manufacturing. The road map

should aim to address perceptions of automation, lack of knowledge about procurement and accessibility to finance. To drive productivity, create high-quality jobs and unlock growth, I urge the Government to develop a national programme to supercharge automation adoption. I would be happy to facilitate ministerial engagement with the MTC team to explore its successful model and how it can be rolled out across the UK.

I ask that, as the Minister and his colleagues finalise the much-needed industrial strategy, they give a renewed focus to the huge potential that automation offers to our businesses, to UK plc and to our people—particularly the younger generation. They want to be the architects of our industrial future and automation can help them to achieve that. It is not just about machines; it is about people, equipping our workforce, empowering our SMEs and delivering prosperity in every region of the UK. Automation is how we will get there.

I came into this House because I believe that democratic politics work. I believe in government and the need for good government to provide the support, the ecosystem and more that is needed to unleash the potential of our country. I know that the Minister and the rest of the Government agree that more than ever we need a dynamic partnership between the Government, skills providers, colleges, universities and businesses—large, medium and small—that helps our manufacturers, our innovators, benefit from automation in a way that has not happened before.

It is not the robots that we should be worried about; it is not building enough of them. I think it is safe to say that we are in the middle of the creation of—willing or otherwise—a new technological, industrial, defence, trading and perhaps even geopolitical paradigm right now. As it is being reformed, with the metal still molten, the need for home-grown advanced manufacturing and innovation is growing, as is the importance of improving productivity and unleashing innovation. I hope that in today's debate I have spoken up for the robots and for automation, because they are not the dystopian usurpers of human inspiration and productive labour; they are, in fact, the enablers of it.

6.14 pm

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): Finally, somebody speaks up for the robots. We have been waiting for centuries. The robots have been clamouring outside, waiting for the moment when somebody would speak up for them, and I am sure that they will be delighted about the way that my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (John Slinger) has done so today.

My hon. Friend made a point right at the beginning about the cultural aspects of how we view the word robotic, which was interesting, was it not? If we say that a politician is robotic, we somehow dismiss them and think that that is inappropriate. Instead, it might actually mean that they are accurate, precise and do things on time. In addition—I suppose this is because I am the Minister for the creative industries—it makes me think of “Hamlet”. Are robotics good or bad? Well, as it says in “Hamlet”:

“There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.”

I think that is part of the problem we have here. For some reason or other, we have decided that automation

[Chris Bryant]

is bad, but actually my hon. Friend is quite right to say that in so many different regards it can only possibly be good.

Often, robotics can take away the drudgery from a repetitive process that a human being might find difficult to maintain in as accurate a way as a robot. It can enhance productivity; several Members who are not even obsessed with this matter are none the less interested in how we can improve our productivity in the UK, because it is one of the ways in which we fail economically. Robotics can also improve the quality and reliability of a product. So, a business that significantly invests in automation can end up, despite the up-front capital costs, recouping that investment much faster than it would if it had relied on other means of producing its goods.

Automation is not about stealing jobs; it is about enabling humans to do other things, including other jobs where human creativity and human ability and the relationship of one human to another may be more important than the repetitive element of the work.

My hon. Friend referred to running the London marathon and asked whether robots can run a marathon for us. I do not think that is the point of a marathon. The point of a marathon is that it is far too long; it is a preposterously lengthy race. I have run the London marathon three times. I had decided that I was not going to race against anybody else; I was just racing against myself, to get to the end. That is my advice to him about how to run a marathon. It was all going swimmingly until I got to the very end—to the last 200 yards—and two women dressed as Bakewell tarts overtook me. Then, I was very upset and decided that I was going to beat the tarts, and I did. However, the point is that there are things where only we humans can compete and where only we can make a difference.

Robotics can also provide solutions to pressing social problems, including autonomous vehicles for transport, which we have not referred to yet, and robotic maintenance and monitoring, supporting clean energy transition. Robotic innovations can also enhance social care, which might be a very significant part of improving productivity and the quality of the care that can be provided, so that the personal human involvement is not about doing the drudgery.

Robotics can also help with surgery in hospitals. It is depressing that we have lagged behind many other countries in bringing, for instance, laparoscopic robotics into hospitals up and down the land. I had two such operations last year; if tea is poured into me, it just pours out as if I were a colander. The significant improvement in the amount of time, the accuracy, the safety and the lack of infection that laparoscopic robotics can provide in surgery is absolutely significant. For instance, as in my case, the ability to remove a melanoma from inside a lung—collapsing the lung and then removing the melanoma—is quite extraordinary and would never have been possible unless we brought automation into the system. However, that requires capital investment.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we are not a world leader in automation; I wish we were. I have slightly different figures from his—mine might be a year out of date—but I think that, according to the International Federation of Robotics, we were 24th in the world in 2023,

but it may be that in 2024 we were 23rd in the world. My hon. Friend pointed out that we are not in the top 10—we are the only G7 country not to be, which is an embarrassment for us. This country has innovated in so many areas, although once we have innovated we have sometimes found it difficult to take things to market and get them invested in—other countries have been better at that—so that is one of the things that the Government need to address. That is shameful. As several Members said, it is part of the problem with our productivity. If we could only get to par with others in the top 10, we would improve our productivity by roughly 20%. British Ministers have been dreaming of that kind of significant improvement in productivity for the past 15 or 20 years, because that would enable the economy to grow far more significantly.

My hon. Friend had a different figure for the significant improvement that we could see in gross value added. My figure is that £150 billion could be added to our GVA by 2035 if we seize hold of the opportunities that robotics and automation provide.

My hon. Friend referred to some of the problems. As I said earlier, I think one of the problems is reluctance. That is partly due to an ethical question: how do we ensure that people do not lose jobs but find different jobs in which they are more effective, productive and engaged? There are also some moral anxieties about robotics—perhaps some of the films that we have produced over the years, which he wittily referred to, have not entirely helped in that.

Another issue is access to cash—in particular, to capital financing. In the discussions I have had as a Department for Science, Innovation and Technology Minister, people from the industry have repeatedly said to me, “It is easier if you are in London and the south-east than it is if you are in the rest of the United Kingdom.” That is another aspect that we need to change. These issues are about automation not just here in London but throughout the United Kingdom, and in so many different sectors. I have responsibility for space, and obviously robotics and automation are a key part of delivering an ambitious space programme in future years. I believe we can be a world leader if we focus on the things that we are particularly good at, and where we have a unique contribution to make, but I am conscious that we need to get the security aspects right.

There are things that we are already doing. As my hon. Friend knows, the Government have a Made Smarter adoption programme, whose budget we doubled to £16 million a year, starting from 1 April 2025. That will undoubtedly make a difference. As he said, we are developing an industrial strategy. Members might think that the country should always have an industrial strategy, a bit like they might think that we should always have a digital inclusion strategy. Those two things have to go hand in hand. We are developing an industrial strategy and, just as in space, we are rightly focusing on the things where we have a unique capability. Through the Department for Business and Trade, we have decided to focus on sectors where we think there is an opportunity for economic growth and where the UK has something special to offer.

I am really glad that the advanced manufacturing plan includes work on robotics, which is key to several elements of advanced manufacturing. I am slightly in danger here, because I have read it and I cannot tell my

hon. Friend what is in it given that we will be publishing it later, but it has not got to its final draft yet. I think that a lot of things that he has been saying will be reflected in that document.

My hon. Friend said that this was not about AI, but sometimes robotics and automation are referred to as “embodied AI”. Obviously, there are significant elements of robotics that work best when they include a learning capacity. That is why I am really proud of the AI opportunities action plan that we launched earlier this year. It has 50 different proposals. We are taking action in relation to all 50, and have been consulting on two. That includes looking at the AI skills gap—a significant aspect, which hon. Friend mentioned. We need to make sure that we have the skills in the UK to develop automation.

Likewise, we have to look at whether we have enough AI graduates coming out of universities, or even starting in that education process. That too is not just a matter for one part of the country; it is a matter for economic growth throughout the country. We also need to increase the diversity of the talent pool that comes into that world. It is not just in one industry, such as automotives, where that might be significant, but a whole series of industries—nearly every one—and also lots of our public services that could be better delivered using embodied artificial intelligence. Similarly, we need to look at the education pathways into AI, and therefore into robotics as well.

Part of DSIT’s funding to UK Research and Innovation goes to Innovate UK, which is responsible for the catapult centres. That includes the one to which my hon. Friend has already referred, the high value manufacturing catapult. DSIT is providing £8.8 billion to UKRI in this financial year; Innovate UK will receive £948 million of that. The high value manufacturing catapult is a strategic research and innovation hub for industry, commercialising the UK’s most advanced manufacturing ideas. The seven centres help businesses to transform the products they sell, the way they make them and the skills of their workforce, to remain competitive globally.

I am delighted that, as has been mentioned, we have had a historic debate on automation. I hope I have not provided a robotic answer to my hon. Friend’s questions. I very much hope that when we produce our industrial strategy in the next few weeks and months, he will be proud to say that we are embracing and fully behind this drive for greater productivity through greater automation, while always holding on to the belief that it is not about replacing people’s jobs. It is about enabling people, with that human element, to play the human role they need to play in whatever industry it may be, whether the creative or automotive or other. My final thought is that the marathon is far too long a distance. I wish him well. I hope he comes in at more than three hours and 24 minutes.

Question put and agreed to.

Road Safety and Active Travel to School

6.30 pm

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered road safety and supporting active travel to school.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I am pleased to introduce this topic, not least in my role as Lib Dem vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for cycling and walking.

Walking and cycling statistics published by the Department for Transport in 2023 show that children have been walking and cycling to school less and less, albeit that the latest data gives hope of a recovery. Figures from the UK national travel survey indicate that the number of children aged five to 15 who walk or cycle to school declined from 67% in 1975-76 to just 47% in 2023. Department for Transport figures suggest that only 3% of children cycle to school, while in London the school run contributes to one in four cars on urban roads at peak times, even in such a densely populated area.

However, half of children tell us that they want to cycle more. Many children already walk and wheel for part of their journey, but a third want to walk and wheel even more, and they need to feel safe in order to do so. During this debate, at least three people in the UK will be killed or seriously injured on our roads. For us as a society, that shocking level of road violence has become normalised, and we must do better.

Beyond the tragedy of injuries and fatalities, why does that matter? First, we all want cleaner air, more accessible streets and healthier children and adults. We also want to empower our children and adults and to create the choice to walk and cycle to school. Although some parents and children need to drive to school, we need to recognise that many would like to walk and cycle but are currently deprived of that choice and freedom.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I was recently privileged to be one of the first cyclists to use the newly opened section of the Curry Rivel Active Travel Group’s car-free path—a transport-free route along the A378, which is a really busy road. It benefits pupils at many of the local primary schools and the local academy. With half of local pupils ineligible for free secondary school transport, the path provides a safe space. Does my hon. Friend agree that investing in active travel routes is key to supporting safe and sustainable school journeys, particularly in rural areas?

Olly Glover: The example my hon. Friend gives from her constituency shows what dedicated infrastructure can achieve in getting more people walking and cycling.

What needs to change, and how? First, as my hon. Friend just said, infrastructure and street design are incredibly important. We know from countries with high rates of walking and cycling that safe and pleasant streets are essential. The majority of accidents in the UK involving those who are cycling occur at junctions, making those areas critical points for targeted interventions. Research consistently identifies the failure to look properly as the leading cause of road injuries among those who are cycling and other road users.

[*Olly Glover*]

I would love to see infrastructure of the quality in Assen, Groningen, Utrecht or Rotterdam—or any other Dutch town or city, for that matter—everywhere in the UK, but there are things we can do in the meantime. In London, there is an example just down the road from this place, where Westminster’s pioneering of side street zebra crossings—zebra crossing markings without the cost of having flashing lights—is a great example of a simple, low-cost intervention. The evidence shows that those crossings are already saving lives and increasing people’s confidence in walking and cycling.

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): Greater Manchester is prioritising road safety by implementing 100 school streets by 2028. Those are areas around schools that limit traffic during drop-off and pick-up times, which will make walking, wheeling and cycling to school safer for young people. Does the hon. Member agree that funding school streets will create safer, more reliable and more child-friendly environments around schools?

Olly Glover: That is a very good example of how spending money well can lead to a big difference.

I have already mentioned the Netherlands, but my hon. Friends on the Lib Dem Benches would be disappointed were I not to bore them to tears by wanging on about the Netherlands at greater length. If I might plug an opportunity for hon. Members to see for themselves the marvels that have been achieved there on active travel, the APPG for cycling and walking plans a trip to the Netherlands in September.

In my constituency, there are many schools where lots of pupils and parents would like to walk and cycle but cannot because of infrastructure or other barriers. The Europa school in Culham is located on a major A road, and for years the parents and the school have campaigned for a crossing to connect the school with the nearby village of Culham across that A road. They have finally got a commitment that that will happen in the next year, but still the so-called cycle path that runs near the school is nothing of the sort: it is a pavement that someone has decided people can cycle on. It is not wide enough, and there have been collisions because of that. Far more needs to be done.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Last September in my constituency, a new school, Oakley, opened without even a direct footpath to the site, and certainly no cycleway. Sadly, within four weeks, there was a serious accident involving a child who had to be airlifted some 60 miles. Does the hon. Member agree that schools should not be allowed to open until such provision is put in place?

Olly Glover: The hon. Member gives a really strong example of how, when we plan new developments and new areas, there is no excuse for not getting the infrastructure right from the off.

Milton, a village where I recently lived, is split in two by the A34 and the enormous Milton interchange roundabout. The St Blaise school on the south side of the parish is effectively cut off from the older side of the village. Even though parish council meetings are only a

mile away, people drive to them because although there have been plans for a footbridge over the A34 for ages, the money has, inexplicably, somehow run out. Villagers and parishioners are therefore not able to make the most of the opportunity to cycle or walk that very short distance.

This issue is not just about infrastructure; it is also about training and confidence to go walking and cycling. The Bikeability training programme, which rolls out cycle training across our schools, reduces risk, increases confidence and encourages long-term health and environmental benefits. It is the largest road safety programme in the world, and it is owned and funded by the Government. Local authorities with higher amounts of Bikeability level 2 training show significantly lower numbers of cyclists killed or seriously injured.

It would be interesting were Bikeability to be included in the national curriculum, just as swimming is; we can imagine how many essential, life-saving, lifelong skills would be formed. However, long-term, secure funding for Bikeability training for children and adults is essential to give providers stability and to enable sustainable planning for delivery. Indeed, 10 or 20 years ago many local authorities did provide free or very low-cost adult cycle training, but sadly many of those programmes have been cut back.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Will my hon. Friend join me in commending the Bikeability Trust? In Oxford West and Abingdon, 61% of year 6 students take level 2 training, but 76% is considered an achievable target for 2025-26. Does he agree that without the Bikeability Trust, none of that would be possible?

Olly Glover: My hon. Friend gives an excellent example of the benefits of Bikeability. Since 2007, Bikeability cycle training has been delivered to over 5 million children in England. In my Oxfordshire constituency of Didcot and Wantage, 61% of year 6 pupils were booked on a Bikeability level 2 course in 2023-24; we aim for three quarters by 2026. In Oxfordshire, uniquely, Bikeability training is delivered by the fire service, for some very interesting historical reasons.

Following Bikeability training, the proportion of children reporting an intention to cycle one to three times per week for school travel increases, from 5% pre training to 24% post training. However, historical delays in funding and an annual funding model have meant that there has been no increase in Bikeability instructor numbers. That needs to change because there is an ongoing need to train more than 300 instructors a year to maintain numbers lost through retirement.

Another theme is culture and leadership. Pavement parking—

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for giving way with almost perfect timing. Bikeability is not the only non-infrastructure approach. Every school in my constituency benefits from a 20 mph scheme that covers most of Edinburgh and—I think he is about to touch on this—a pavement parking ban. Those non-infrastructure approaches can be delivered cheaply and quickly. Does he agree that we need more of those in the UK?

Olly Glover: Yes, tackling pavement parking is essential, because three quarters of children support stopping cars parking on the pavement, as do 58% of parents and guardians.

Councils in Wales and in most of England have limited pavement parking powers, relying on cumbersome street-by-street traffic regulation orders. In contrast, London councils have had powers to enforce against pavement parking since the 1970s, and Scotland gained them last year. Councils know their areas best, and the Liberal Democrats are calling for traffic regulation orders to be made easier for local authorities to process, so that they can take action on pavement parking more swiftly and at lower cost.

The upcoming road safety strategy is an urgent opportunity to save lives by tackling issues such as pavement parking. It must include measures to initiate a comprehensive road danger review; improve awareness of and adherence to the highway code; improve the safety of home-to-school travel; and deliver the integration of national strategy and funding with local policy.

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): The hon. Member is giving an interesting speech and making important points, but distances in some rural areas mean that walking, and often cycling, are not feasible. Does he agree that any review needs a particular focus on rural roads and should perhaps support reducing speeds outside schools? In constituencies such as mine, there is not yet a policy of having 20 mph. Perhaps he can give some examples of rural roads in the Netherlands.

Olly Glover: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. This is not one size fits all, and we need to recognise the different characters and characteristics of our areas. However, in the Netherlands there would always be this thing called a cycle path next to rural roads, so there is that segregation and people have confidence. That is the key difference. Even in places in the UK with lots of land, that is not something we generally see. It is important that, as elected representatives of our communities, we lead by example where we can and walk and cycle where possible.

In conclusion, we can empower young people to walk, wheel or cycle to school by providing them with the confidence to do that through schemes such as Bikeability and by putting in place measures to keep them safe, such as those around pavement parking and around infrastructure and street design improvements. I thank the Minister for already having kindly agreed to see Bikeability training in action in my constituency, and I look forward to hearing more about the Government's plans for this topic, including what they plan to do to make it normal, rather than an eccentric exception, to walk or cycle to school.

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): I intend to call the Front-Bench spokespeople at about 7.5 pm. The debate is heavily oversubscribed, so I am putting an informal time limit of two minutes on all speeches. Even with that I might not get everybody in, but let us see how it goes. I call the Chair of the Transport Committee.

6.42 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) on securing the debate and on his excellent

speech. I will focus on the school streets initiative, which has already got many more families in Hounslow walking, cycling and scooting to school, and it will have a similar effect elsewhere. The school streets initiative protects those who already walk, scoot and cycle. Being in an urban area, the majority of our schoolchildren and their families do walk, but there is some very selfish behaviour from some parents who want to drive all the way to the school gates and back out again if it is in a cul-de-sac. I have seen some very dangerous behaviour, as I am sure other Members have.

In Hounslow, there are about 30 school streets. Around 25% of car trips in the morning peak seem to be related to families on the school run. The school streets initiative is an important measure, but it can also support wider ambitions to improve air quality and reduce collisions. Hounslow has monitored the implementation of the initiative at three schools. It has seen an increase in walking, wheeling and cycling of almost 10% in the morning peak and almost 12% in the afternoon peak. There has been no displacement of traffic on to boundary roads as a result of the schemes, and there has been an increase in overall pedestrian movements, which shows that, as a travel behaviour policy, it has benefits beyond the school.

I heard from a headteacher who really welcomed the scheme's implementation outside her school. She said that many more families now feel safe to walk towards the school gates, and she no longer has to speak to parents numerous times about safely driving to school. The scheme works using an automatic number plate recognition system.

Finally, I reinforce the request that the Minister introduce a default pavement parking ban, as we have in London, that allows exceptions when there is no other option and that focuses on national targets for increasing walking, cycling and wheeling.

6.46 pm

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): It is an honour to speak under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) for securing the debate.

Giving children the opportunity to safely walk or cycle to school is vital. It not only ingrains healthy habits in children from a young age, bringing them closer to the nature and scenery that can be found in areas such as my constituency of Melksham and Devizes, but it teaches them road safety lessons, fosters independence and helps prevent climate change. Active travel practices in schools can also reduce traffic volume in our towns and villages as the number of cars around schools are reduced, thus minimising both pollution and the risk of road accidents.

I commend Holt VC primary school in my constituency for its Big Walk and Wheel programme earlier this year, which saw many children in the village walk and cycle to school and take part in a walking bus. We need to encourage more of this. In Bradford-on-Avon, a town in my constituency that suffers greatly from traffic congestion, traffic is even worse during term time. This has meant more dangers for those on the road, especially children.

During my time as a Wiltshire councillor, I worked with the Wiltshire Climate Alliance, as well as a number of other active travel-and-road-safety groups, to improve

[*Brian Mathew*]

safety for those who use our roads—from cyclists to pedestrians, horses and horse riders. Unfortunately, that failed, but I hope the upcoming road safety strategy can be effective. Let us make travel to school not just pleasurable, but safe.

6.47 pm

Julia Buckley (Shrewsbury) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. I congratulate the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) on securing this vital debate. I am a member of the all-party parliamentary group for cycling and walking, which he chairs. Cycling is a key priority for my constituency of Shrewsbury, where 68% of pupils aged 10 and 11 were trained under the famous Bikeability scheme at school. Unfortunately, in our historic town, we have in recent years allowed the car to dominate most of our neighbourhoods to the detriment of road safety.

Just last month, on 20 March, I met the young people on the Shrewsbury youth council at the Grange Centre in Harlescott, and listened to their feedback on our Shrewsbury Moves plan for more active travel. They told me they do not feel safe cycling on the roads due to the speed of drivers and lack of cycle paths. Does the Minister agree that investment in segregated routes to create that all-important separation between cyclists and motor vehicles is vital to enabling and encouraging more people to cycle and walk short journeys, such as across my congested, yet beautiful town of Shrewsbury?

6.49 pm

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) on his excellent pronunciation of Dutch towns, including Groningen. It is fair to say that in this debate there is a lot of agreement on the benefits of active travel, but even when local authorities have the ambition to deliver cycle schemes, land ownership all too often gets in the way. In my own constituency of Henley and Thame, residents have tirelessly campaigned for a greenway cycle route between Haddenham and Thame. These settlements are just three miles apart.

The project received a welcome boost this year when Oxfordshire county council assigned £200,000 for further optioning, but for now the development is marooned until a process of land assembly is completed, which requires lengthy negotiations with landowners. Road projects, for which compulsory-purchase powers are wielded readily, do not suffer the same fate. Officers in my own highway authority tell me there are few precedents for cycleways making successful use of compulsory purchase orders, but are keen to learn more. CPOs for cycle schemes are easily challenged as it becomes impossible to make the case for one specific route over another, and councils are reluctant to pursue a CPO because of the risk of losing the case and of the process becoming a fruitless, costly exercise.

Other villages in my area—Watlington, Chinnor and Sonning Common—all hope to have cycle ways. I very much hope that the Minister will say whether she will support councils to use CPOs to progress active travel

schemes by issuing strengthened guidance and perhaps by revisiting some of the words of the Senedd on this issue in 2019.

6.50 pm

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Mrs Hobhouse, and I thank the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) for securing this very important date, for which we do not have nearly enough time.

I have talked before about Burnley Road in Bacup several times in debates, both here in Westminster Hall and in the main Chamber. There have been serious injuries and fatalities at various points on this main road and speeding is endemic. One house has been hit three times by out-of-control cars. Residents cite numerous close calls and the fear that that generates.

Thorn primary school is set back to the east of the road, with many of its pupils living to the west. If those pupils wish to walk to school, they must cross the busy road at a point where there is no lollipop service, 20 mph zone or zebra crossing. Pupils and parents do not feel safe making the crossing and so drive to school, which in turn leads to congestion, pavement parking and close calls on the roads immediately around the school. Such is the concern that pupils at Thorn have started road safety campaigns calling for action. For instance, William Cartwright, a year 6 pupil, came to one of my surgeries to push the case. He has to cross Burnley Road every day with his two younger brothers and friends. He says:

“Cars travel very fast. We often have to run across the road and I’ve nearly been hit several times.”

He has just started a petition, which already has 350 signatures.

However, when I asked Lancashire County Council to explore options for a crossing point, I was told that historical casualty figures for that particular section of road did not justify an intervention. That sort of response, which dismisses community concerns, flies in the face of common sense. As William says, we should not have to wait for an accident to happen before something is done.

Across Rossendale and Darwen, parents and children are telling us that it is only a matter of time before someone is seriously hurt or killed near our schools. We must do better and listen to our communities. Local authorities should draw on all available data to assess risk, adding in community feedback and lived experience, and actually prevent harm. That, of course, is exactly what happens elsewhere in Europe and in forward-looking authorities in the UK. The Government’s new road safety strategy must ensure that the very best risk-based practices are followed throughout the country. If that happens alongside all the other measures that we will hear about today, we can make active travel, with all the benefits it brings, a genuine option for our schoolchildren.

6.52 pm

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse.

Imagine being 14, 15 or 16 and being stuck in a rural village. For rural kids, bikes mean freedom. We have to make it easier to create cycle paths alongside dangerous rural roads, so that kids can have the freedom to travel independently. On that note, I would like—surprisingly—to

do a shout-out for South West Water, which is seeking planning permission for a solar farm on the edge of Totnes. After 20 years of campaigning by local councillors and a very committed group of activists, South West Water has finally agreed to put a cycle path through that solar farm. We have not quite got it over the line yet, but I am putting on the record today that we really want to see it become a reality. It will link to Totnes a village that is just a few miles away, giving people there the ability to cycle into town safely, thereby cutting down on the amount of traffic coming into our small rural town.

Such cycle routes are absolutely vital in rural areas, where the roads are extremely dangerous. They connect communities, allow people to avoid dangerous roads and provide a safe option for healthy active travel, which is so important for health and wellbeing as well as the environment.

I would like to give a shout-out to Jon Oliverio, who lives in Torbay in my constituency. He is an absolute cycling champion and youth mentor, who has helped thousands of children and adults to gain the confidence to cycle safely and independently, inspiring lifelong habits, promoting wellbeing and sparking a love for cycling that has truly rippled out across families and communities. We need more people like Jon.

6.53 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) for securing this debate.

Just a few weeks ago, I visited Hazel Slade primary academy in my constituency. Pupils there told me in no uncertain terms that each day they are frightened when they walk to school. They told me what they want to see to make them feel safer and asked for my help to make it happen. Parents, children and teachers have all told me that they want to see a road safety assessment carried out and traffic calming measures put in to reduce the risks posed by dangerous driving along Rugeley Road and Cannock Wood Street. Parents should be able to trust that every day their child will get home from school safely.

Between 2018 and 2023, there were a staggering 869 road casualties in Cannock Chase, including two fatalities on the Rugeley Road between Hazelslade and Brereton.

In Bridgtown, where the A5 separates older and newer parts of the village, parents and wheelchair users have told me that they feel they are taking their life into their hands by crossing a major road, and that their county councillor has ignored their pleas for support for a proper pedestrian crossing. Choosing active travel should not come at a risk. Proper pedestrian crossings, school-appropriate signage and enforceable speed limits are all needed to stop those risks. As we lack that in many parts of Cannock Chase, parents often feel that they have no choice but to drive their children to school.

That brings me to roadside parking by schools, an issue that all too often exacerbates those risks to children, as I am sure we have all seen. Many drivers in Staffordshire know that enforcement is limited, so parking on double yellow lines is becoming increasingly common, partly due to a lack of penalty notices and partly due to a lack

of parking options. That is the case for nearly every school in my constituency, so to support active travel and to ensure that we are able to keep streets safe, stronger enforcement options are vital. I would like to see the county council take up the offer from our parish councils to work together on that.

For now, it is clear that it is the responsibility of local authorities to take steps to reduce collisions. I once again voice my full support for the residents of Hazelslade, Bridgtown and all the towns and villages that I represent in demanding further action on road safety.

6.55 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Hobhouse. Across mid and east Devon, I have heard time and again from young people who want safer ways to get to school by foot and by wheeling. Students at Sidmouth college have been asking for something very simple: a cycle path between Sidford and Sidbury. Right now, the main road between those two villages is narrow, winding and dangerous, especially for schoolchildren walking or cycling. When there is a bus, cost is a barrier. Without a dedicated path, young people are missing out on after-school clubs, social time or extra help with learning. A safe cycle path would give those young people real independence; it would help them to stay active and healthy, and it would cut down on car use.

We have a separate problem in Ottery St Mary. Coleridge bridge was built back in 2011 but was damaged over a year ago by a storm. Parents are now driving their children to school where previously they went over that footbridge. The bridge repair is being held up by environmental permits, and I have asked Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs to find a better balance. Of course, protecting our biodiversity and our rivers is vital, but so is the safety of our children. We are having children risk their lives in the dark hours during wintertime by going on very narrow pavements and into the road.

The third example that I want to speak on is the King's school in Ottery, which proposes a multi-use path from Feniton to Sidmouth along an old railway line. A survey by the Otter Trail group found that 73% of local people currently felt unsafe cycling in the Otter valley.

To recap, the Sidbury-Sidford cycle path, the Coleridge bridge and the Otter trail are all practical, community-backed projects that Devon county council really ought to get behind. The Westminster Government have a role to play in getting behind rural local authorities to enable them to make more safe routes to school.

6.57 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) for his work in securing today's debate. I realise that time is pressing, so I will try to keep my remarks to two or three key points that affect my constituents within Reading. First, I offer my wholehearted support to the enhancement of walking and cycling around the country, and I also reiterate both the health and environmental benefits of this important work.

[*Matt Rodda*]

There has been some excellent work in my constituency, and I want to pay tribute briefly to some of the people involved in the roll-out of School Streets, which is heavily dependent on a partnership between Reading borough council and local volunteers. That is working extremely well: it is reducing pollution, increasing health and offering young people the chance to walk to the local school in a number of parts of our town—that is making a big difference locally. However, it depends on a lot of good will and I urge more people, if they are able to volunteer, to come forward. The volunteers in some schemes at the moment are under some pressure, and it is important that we grow that project across the town on a much wider basis.

I also want to mention the importance and benefits of building more safe cycle and walking routes. We have had some real success in recent years building a new foot and pedestrian bridge over the River Thames between the two main bridges used by cars and heavy lorries. That has significantly enhanced walking and cycling into the town centre from the north of the town and other routes have been opened up, a number of which have not been accessible for some time. In other local areas in town, that has increased walking and cycling, such as the work along Bath Road, as well as a number of other paths and routes. Innovation is key. We should look at innovative ways of encouraging children to use active travel, such as the wonderful scheme called Beat the Street in my area, which has been extremely successful.

6.59 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I thank you for chairing the debate, Mrs Hobhouse, and congratulate my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover), on securing it.

I am the MP for the dreaming spires. If we think Oxford, we think Headington stone and copper roofs and bicycles everywhere; indeed, 20% of people in Oxford commute to work by bike. I am also proud to be the MP for the No. 1 school in the country for cycling to school, Cherwell school in north Oxford: 58% of the students cycle and only 11% get there by car. In part, that is facilitated by an incredibly popular segregated cycle lane that runs all along the road towards the school, but many parents will point out that the cycle lane is at the very end of the commute to school, and there are no segregated cycle lanes all the way up the Banbury Road and the Woodstock Road. There was a plan for the Woodstock Road and a plan to look at feasibility on the Banbury Road, but the Labour city council decided that it wanted instead to spend the money on what local people call the vanity bridge to nowhere, elsewhere in Oxford. That was a crying shame, because the return on investment of segregated cycle lanes is not to be underestimated.

In Abingdon, we have our own problems. National cycle route 5 passes through the town centre, but cyclists need to dismount exactly halfway down the route. Councillor Neil Fawcett has been instrumental in securing funding for a redesign, as a result of which the route will be safer and faster.

Oxfordshire is led by the Liberal Democrats and we are greatly ambitious for cycling in our county. We want to increase the number of cycle trips from 600,000 a

year to 1 million by 2031. My question to the Minister is: what other pots of money are there that we can bid for? Each one of these schemes is incredibly good value for money. They produce safer, faster and healthier schemes, which is what we all want for our constituents.

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): I will impose a one-minute limit on speeches now, so that we can get as many in as possible.

7.2 pm

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Hobhouse. There are 33 MPs sat in this room participating in this very important debate. The same number of children aged seven and under are killed or seriously injured on our roads every three weeks. That shows the importance of the debate, and I know that Members from across the House will want to do everything they can to change that statistic.

The main point that I want to make in the seconds that I have left is that it is up to us and our communities to make sure that we always think creatively to help alleviate traffic problems. That needs to be part of the mix, including for formal traffic calming measures. We should not wait for a tragedy to force us to take action. I look forward to hearing what the Minister feels she can do to support the work that communities like mine are doing.

7.3 pm

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): There are so many ridiculous things about modern housing developments, but chief among them is the fact that they are still designed around car usage as the primary mode of transport. An obsession with winding roads to the depths of rabbit-warren estates will never encourage people to use active travel. Instead, we need to build new housing developments with cycle lanes, footpaths and green corridors at their heart.

Current planning legislation gives precious little power to planners when facing the greed and legal appetite of property developers, but we cannot carry on building houses people cannot afford, with designs that are making people unhealthy, car-dependent and isolated. We can ingrain the same walking and cycling culture that my North Norfolk villages have developed over decades for the homes, families and children of the future. The question is, will the Government legislate to make it possible?

7.4 pm

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): I think everyone in this room agrees that walking and cycling are good; they are good for health, for the environment and for young people's social skills. I also think they are a selling point for people trying to sell houses. In my constituency, there is a development called Bidwell West. For the last decade, there have been pretty pictures of children cycling to a local school, only that school has not yet been built, which is a bit of a problem. Children have to go a mile and a half away, on a completely and utterly unsuitable road, with a lack of footpaths—there are footpaths, but they have to cross from one side of the road to the other—water

running off the nearby fields and a lack of street lighting, because it was not built for that. My question to the Minister is: how do we make sure that this does not happen as we build more houses, which we desperately need?

7.5 pm

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): It is genuine pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) for securing this important debate.

We are very short on time, so I just want to shout out a charity that has been doing excellent work for nearly 100 years. It is called Living Streets, although it used to be known by different names, and it has been encouraging walking, cycling and active travel for a really long time. I recently had the pleasure of walking around the streets of my constituency with people from the charity to see the challenges that people who are trying to walk, cycle and wheel are facing, which we have talked about, such as pavement parking and potholes not just in the roads, but on the pavements. There are pedestrian railings and barriers by pedestrian crossings that have been damaged. A car mounted and damaged a pedestrian barrier very close to where I live about two years ago, and Essex county council has failed to replace the barrier, despite being told about it many times. There is so much that we can do. We should take the example of Switzerland, where children as young as four walk to school by themselves every day. It can be done if we put the infrastructure in place.

7.6 pm

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Hobhouse. I will make three points.

Affordability can be a barrier to children taking up active travel to school. We have a great local charity in my constituency called Changing Lives Together, which runs a scheme called ReCycles. The scheme, which was launched last year, saves bikes from going to waste by refurbishing and reusing them, and taking old donated bikes to do so. It has have saved about 220 bikes to date. I hope that we can encourage that type of scheme nationally to allow people to overcome the affordability barrier.

On infrastructure, we need a cultural shift in how we plan and think about development. Section 106 agreements need to give greater consideration to active travel routes to ensure that new developments do not just provide homes, but create safe environments for children to travel to school.

Finally, we should take the opportunity afforded by the curriculum and assessment review to embed cycling and active travel in our education system. Just as swimming has been part of the curriculum since 1994, Bikeability level 2 at key stage 2 would equip children with the skills and confidence needed to cycle safely.

7.7 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): To incentivise walking, wheeling and cycling, and to form habits, we need to invest in capital and revenue infrastructure, skills development and, above all, ambition—not least because half the number of girls as

boys travel to school by bike. With Active Travel England in the heart of my constituency, I recognise the importance of that.

We need to ensure there is safe space around schools, as we have heard; that we slow traffic, as with Acomb primary school and Acomb Road; and that we stop the chaos outside schools, as with Our Lady Queen of Martyrs school on Hamilton Drive. We also need to ensure that school travel plans are active in driving the ambition that every family should be engaged in active travel. I ask the Minister to review that, and to encourage simple measures—as Chris Boardman says, we should use paint and plastic before the hard-wired infrastructure.

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): I am sorry, but I will have to stop Back-Bench contributions here. Members have been incredibly good at sticking to a very tight time limit. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

7.8 pm

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Hobhouse. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) on securing the debate. His opening speech was thoughtful, and the speeches of so many Members from across the House were heartfelt and often heart-rending.

As Members from across the House have made clear, children across the country should feel safe when attending school, and parents, teachers and children should feel confident in cycling or walking to school. In many cases, however, that is very difficult. We know that walking and cycling to school brings huge benefits to children's health—both physical and mental—and to the environment and the wider community, yet fewer children are doing it. As my hon. Friend the Member for Didcot and Wantage made clear, in 1975 around two thirds of children walked or cycled to school, but today that figure is under 50%, with just 3% cycling.

The decline is not inevitable. In fact, many studies have shown that schools, parents and children themselves would like the ability to walk or cycle to school, but many barriers remain. Road safety around schools remains a key issue. Last year, 64 children under 16 were killed on our roads and more than 12,000 were injured—34 every single day.

It is concerning that the danger is greatest in the places where children should be the safest: near their schools. I have sadly seen the tragic consequences of that in my constituency. In July 2023, there was a tragic road incident at The Study school in Wimbledon, which took the lives of two beautiful young children. The matter is still under investigation by the police, so I will be circumspect in my comments. Suffice it to say that when I met school staff recently, they made it clear that further steps must be taken to improve road safety around the school to prevent such an incident from happening again. Many schools, especially in rural areas, sit on or near roads with 40 mph or even 50 mph speed limits. That is simply unacceptable.

We know that children are more at risk between 3 pm and 6 pm, on their way home from school, and yet Government action remains piecemeal, reactive and underfunded. The UK once led the world in cutting road deaths. Bold steps such as drink-driving laws,

[Mr Paul Kohler]

seatbelt rules, safer infrastructure and education campaigns massively reduced incidents in Great Britain, but we are falling behind. Countries across Europe have made active travel safer and more accessible, while our progress has stalled. The Liberal Democrats are consequently calling on the Government to publish the long-overdue road safety strategy without delay.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I add my voice to my hon. Friend's call for the Government to get on with updating the road safety strategy. At the moment, they are suggesting that local communities must wait for three serious accidents or deaths for a fixed speed camera to be installed. Does he agree that we should shift the thinking, look at fixed speed cameras more as a preventive than a punitive tool, and update the guidance accordingly?

Mr Kohler: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we must be proactive, and not reactive to death. We must anticipate accidents and do something before they happen.

The strategy must prioritise children and active travel, and draw lessons from past successes, including the road safety plan of the year 2000, which had a transformative impact and helped halve fatalities in just a decade. The lack of specific active travel infrastructure is linked to that. We must continue to improve the provision of safe cycling and walking routes across our communities. We must improve parents' and schools' confidence in children using active travel to get to school.

Research from Cycling UK shows that the appetite is there. In rural areas such as Devon, 84% of people support more walking and cycling, but more than 80% feel that their local roads are unsafe. When the Department for Transport asked families what would help children walk to school, the most common answers were safer roads and safe crossing points. Improving the provision of designated routes, safer crossings and better lighting is vital to improving active travel.

The Government must also properly invest in cycling and walking infrastructure, and put a new comprehensive active travel strategy in place. Their increase in funding for active travel is welcome, but they must ensure that the money is spent effectively and targeted at where it is needed.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that schemes such as the Great Northern Railway trail, which provides a secure, segregated green cycleway and walkway linking towns, villages and local schools, are where active travel investment should be prioritised? As the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) mentioned, we must ensure that planning regulations make greenways much easier to install.

Mr Kohler: I totally agree: that is exactly the type of thing that we must prioritise. Yes, money is tight, but we must spend it where it will be most effective.

We must integrate active travel infrastructure with public transport and key community sites, including schools. As my hon. Friend the Member for Didcot and Wantage and others made clear, it is key that we improve cycle training for everyone, including young people. We must give all children access to cycle training, which will

teach them the skills they need to be confident at cycling. That will not only get them into habits that will last a lifetime, but will save lives. As we have heard repeatedly, Bikeability training is shown to lower fatalities and serious injuries on the road.

Those improvements must also come from working with communities and parents. Although there are parents who drive their children to school—

Wera Hobhouse (in the Chair): Order. Will the hon. Gentleman bring his remarks quickly to a close?

Mr Kohler: I will. In conclusion, this is about more than roads; it is about the kind of communities that we want to build. Let us work together to improve active travel for our children and our adults.

7.15 pm

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mrs Hobhouse. I congratulate the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage—and possibly for the Netherlands—(Olly Glover) on securing this important debate. In just an hour of Westminster Hall, we have had many contributions, far more than normal, including from the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), who I served on the Transport Committee with in the last Parliament, and who of course now chairs that Committee, and from the hon. Members for Melksham and Devizes (Brian Mathew), for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley), for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae), for South Devon (Caroline Voaden), for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury), for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord), for Reading Central (Matt Rodda), for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), for Mansfield (Steve Yemm), for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone), for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer), for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman), for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper), for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and, of course, my constituency neighbour the hon. Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo).

I saved that one for last because the hon. Member for Henley and Thame spoke of the Haddenham and Thame greenway, which I have always supported. A significant chunk of it falls in my Mid Buckinghamshire constituency, from the village of Haddenham through to the Oxfordshire border. I believe we have a meeting coming up to discuss how to progress that. It is a project that should go ahead, for many of the good reasons that have been outlined by others in this afternoon's debate, but it has a potted history of falling over at various hurdles, most recently as we came out of the pandemic. I gently say that it was actually Oxfordshire that pulled the funding plug on the project at that point, but I am delighted that it is back on track and that we are making progress.

The importance of road safety and how we improve it is something that we should all consider very carefully. There are always improvements that can be made to road safety, not least outside schools, and it is important that we reflect on those tragedies that some Members have spoken about that have occurred outside schools. Any death or injury of a child is one too many, and we must all take steps to prevent those. Indeed, nowhere is road safety more important than outside schools. To declare an interest of sorts, with three children—two at

primary school and the youngest due to start primary school this coming September—it is something that I consider very carefully.

It is through that rural lens that I will make my first comments. It is undoubtedly the case that in many rural communities, no matter how much parents, or indeed the children themselves, may want to cycle or walk, the practical realities of not having a school in every village, of 60 mph country lanes with no pavements connecting villages, often going some distance, mean that many parents simply have no choice but to insist that they drive their children to school or that their children get the bus—where such a thing is still available. Indeed, although I do not want to set off the grammar school debate, in counties such as Buckinghamshire that have grammar schools, there is some considerable distance for that age cohort of pupils to travel—going from the edge of the county to get to the grammars in Aylesbury or Amersham, for example—where cycling or walking simply would not be practical.

While I want to encourage those who wish to cycle or walk to school, for some, driving is a necessity due to time. People have busy lives; all our constituents have busy lives; we have busy lives. To accompany a child, particularly of primary school age, on a walk or cycle to school may take significant time out of that parent's, carer's or guardian's day—time that they may not have. It is therefore important for us not to judge those parents who make the choice to get their children to school by a different route.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I hope the Opposition spokesperson can do me a favour: a charity in my constituency headed by David Dixon, the bicycle mayor for Tynedale, and supported by No. 28 Community House in Hexham, is trying to get Northumberland county council to support a pretty innovative cycle to school initiative in Hexham. However, it is falling on deaf ears with the Tory group in Northumberland County Hall. Could the hon. Gentleman possibly have a word with some of his colleagues there?

Greg Smith: I think I am grateful for that intervention. I am not sure whether I have any contacts in the Conservative group on the hon. Gentleman's council, but I will gladly see if I can get that message passed to them.

In the limited time we have available, I would like the Minister, when she sums up, to consider a few practical points about how we might start making this problem better. I will start with getting the basics right. When I drop my middle child to school—a rural primary school in a village—I watch a particular taxi driver pull up on the zig-zag lines every single morning. The dirty look I give him does not appear to be doing very well in stopping that behaviour. If we cannot enforce the basic rules that we already have outside schools, what hope do we have of making it better? I ask the Minister to reflect on how we can better enforce those rules and implement the important points that many hon. Members made about yellow line parking and pavement parking.

I also ask her to consider the physical infrastructure near schools, such as narrowing sight lines, which force drivers to slow down; there is a lot of evidence out there about those and other physical infrastructure such as chicanes. On the question of speed—I promise that

I will draw to a conclusion very quickly, Mrs Hobhouse—we have heard examples from the Netherlands, but I have seen examples in France and some parts of the USA of variable speed limits outside schools at drop-off times. Can that be considered in this country, perhaps to answer the very good challenge laid down by my hon. Friend the Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth)? There is a lot more that can be done in this area, and I urge the Minister to get on with it.

7.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mrs Hobhouse. I congratulate the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) on securing this debate and on his compelling arguments for more active travel and for improving road safety. We heard from 23 hon. Members—probably more, if we include the recent interventions—and I value their contributions to the debate. I cannot possibly answer all the issues raised, but I welcome the support for further action on these issues. I am responding as the Minister responsible for road safety.

I share the hon. Gentleman's ambitions for active travel. Whether it is walking, wheeling or cycling, it is positive to see more of it. I am sure we have all seen how much quieter the roads are during the school holidays. That is a visible reminder of how many children are being driven to school and how much less congestion there could be if more people felt able to walk or cycle their children to school—or to let their children walk or cycle to school themselves, as perhaps some of us did when we were young.

Transport is at the heart of our mission-driven Government, and active travel is one of the strongest interventions that we can make to boost the health of the nation. Building safe, accessible and high-quality active travel infrastructure gives people the choice to walk and cycle. It can also improve the safety of our roads, reduce the number of collisions and, very importantly, cut the number of people who are killed and seriously injured. I assure hon. Members that we are keen to support local authorities to develop the infrastructure that works for their local area, whether that is introducing lower speed limits, segregated infrastructure or improved or new crossings, as a number of Members mentioned.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): Labour-run Ealing council has introduced 41 school streets across the borough, which has caused a 29% increase in children walking and cycling to school and taken one in five cars off the road in terms of school runs. Will the Minister look at that sort of evidence when she is coming to her road safety strategy, and will she consider visiting constituencies such as mine to see the success of Ealing Labour's programme?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend highlights the fantastic work that many local authorities are doing, and I welcome the evidence that she shared.

Since Active Travel England was created, we have seen a fivefold improvement in schemes meeting minimum quality standards, ensuring that what is being built is of a higher quality, enhancing safety and increasing uptake while reducing collisions. That represents a significant

[*Lilian Greenwood*]

improvement, considering that 70% of people cite safety as the main barrier preventing them from walking, wheeling or cycling. The work of Active Travel England is key to delivering high quality and value for money improvements to our roads and the public realm. That includes rural areas.

As a number of hon. Members rightly highlighted, this is about not only safety, but extending opportunities for young people and others who cannot or do not want to drive. As part of its role, Active Travel England is improving connections with new housing developments. That is vital for places experiencing housing growth, as a number of hon. Members mentioned. Where roads and public services, including new schools or health centres, are being built, it should be the perfect opportunity to build in active travel infrastructure from the start, which is much cheaper and easier than trying to retrofit it later.

Richard Foord: Will the Minister give way?

Lilian Greenwood: I will not, because I am very conscious of the time.

If we want to encourage modal shift and improve health through transport, we absolutely must improve safety on the roads. People will only change their travel behaviour if they feel that it is safe for them and their families. As has been mentioned repeatedly, too many people, including children, are killed and seriously injured on our roads. That is precisely why this Government, alongside investing in active travel, are developing the first road safety strategy in more than a decade.

I wholeheartedly agree that we can and should do better than a decade of stagnation when it comes to road deaths. The Department is considering a variety of road safety measures for inclusion. As we develop the strategy, I am committed to continuing to engage with hon. Members, stakeholders and road safety organisations. I very much welcome the many suggestions made this evening, and I look forward to publishing the strategy in due course—I hope that that will be sooner rather than later.

One issue often mentioned by members of the public that can have a significant impact on the school run, and in particular on more vulnerable road users, is pavement parking. Many hon. Members have raised it in this debate. Interestingly, by coincidence, I met Guide Dogs, Living Streets, Sustrans and Transport for All just this afternoon to discuss the issue. The Department intends to publish a formal response to the 2020 consultation and to set out next steps on this policy area

in due course. In the meantime, highway authorities can of course introduce and enforce specific local pavement parking restrictions if they so wish.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): Cycling is great for young lungs and kind to the environment. Will the Minister join me in commending Avonbourne boys' and girls' academies, Avonwood primary school and King's Park academy in Bournemouth East for their fantastic work in spotting cycling infrastructure opportunities and getting them built?

Lilian Greenwood: I am delighted to recognise that fantastic work. Giving children the opportunity to walk, wheel or cycle to school is fundamental to their development and, as many people have said, builds good habits from an early age. When a quarter of children leaving primary school are overweight and 40% of primary school children are being driven to school, now is the time to provide healthier alternatives.

A number of hon. Members talked about school streets. Active Travel England recently published guidance that will assist local authorities in planning, developing and implementing school streets. As a direct result of its funding, 180 school streets have been developed, and of course there are many more. They are a great opportunity, and the benefits speak for themselves: cleaner air, fewer cars, less congestion, improved physical and mental health, and of course safer roads. I would love to mention the school streets trial in Hackney, which has provided fantastic evidence; my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), the Chair of the Select Committee, talked about the evidence from Hounslow, and we also heard about Ealing.

Alongside school streets, Active Travel England is funding a wide range of support to enable more children to walk, wheel and cycle to school, including Bikeability cycle training, which I am keen to see, the Living Streets Walk to School outreach programme and Modeshift support for travel planning.

I am conscious that I have run out of time. We have announced a further £300 million for active travel and we will set out plans for future years following the spending review. I had better sit down now, but I am sure there will be many more opportunities to discuss these vital issues in the days ahead.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered road safety and supporting active travel to school.

7.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 22 April 2025

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Living Heritage Inventory: Consultation Response

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): I am repeating the following written ministerial statement made today in the other place by my noble Friend, the Minister for Gambling and Heritage and DCMS Lords Minister, Baroness Twycross:

The Government have published the response to the consultation on the inventories of living heritage, one of the key obligations under the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, which the UK ratified last year. The response details how we, working closely with the devolved Governments, will create inventories of living heritage of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which will combine into a UK inventory.

The Government will start a conversation throughout the UK about our cultural heritage—the folklore, performance, customs and crafts that play an important role in the identity, pride, and cohesion of communities across the UK—and how we collectively safeguard this intangible cultural heritage or ‘living heritage’.

The Government have taken an open, inclusive and community-based approach to implementing the convention and we are grateful to the many who participated in the roundtables and submitted responses to the consultation. This engagement has been invaluable in developing the criteria, categories, and approach we will use for the inventories. DCMS has worked closely with the devolved Governments to agree the consultation response.

Later this year, the Government will open the call for submissions to these inventories with full guidance and information about how to submit an item. DCMS will engage and include as many communities as possible to recognise and celebrate the extraordinary range of living heritage across all corners of the UK.

[HCWS588]

Bedford Universal Theme Park and Resort

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): I am pleased to publish an update on the proposal for the construction of a Universal Destinations and Experiences (UDX) theme park and resort in Bedford, further to the Prime Minister’s announcement of the same during recess on 9 April.

We have reached an agreement in principle for Universal to turn the site of the former Kempston Hardwick brickworks, on the outskirts of Bedford, into a 476-acre theme park and entertainment resort complex. The expected multi-billion pound investment from the American company will be one of the most significant investments to be made in the United Kingdom in this Parliament, and is among the largest single investments ever in the UK tourism and entertainment sector.

The benefits of the project are substantial. Universal estimates that it will deliver over £50 billion for the economy by 2055; and that 8.5 million visitors will come to it in its first year of operation in 2031. Over the course of the construction period, 20,000 jobs will be

created, with a peak of 5,000 on site at the busiest time. The park and resort will employ 8,000 people in its first year, which is anticipated to rise to 10,000 by the 20th year of operation. Jobs will require skills of all kinds, with opportunities to develop careers in a range of creative, administrative and technical fields. The development is expected to become the biggest visitor attraction in the UK, surpassing our current top attraction of the British Museum. It will be the first Universal theme park in Europe and one of the largest visitor attractions on the continent.

This investment is the Government’s plan for change in action, directly improving the lives of working people and strengthening our country. It aligns with our missions to kick-start economic growth and break down barriers to opportunity—providing valuable opportunities outside of London and our bigger cities for professionals to develop their careers and live meaningful lives.

In November, this Government announced the creative industries as a priority growth-sector, and a key pillar of the upcoming industrial strategy. Universal’s theme park and resort is one demonstration of how this Government are already securing investment in the high-growth sectors that will drive our growth mission.

Part of the reason Universal chose the UK as their European home was due to the strength of our creative industries. From Dua Lipa to Shakespeare, Conan Doyle to Hogwarts, we are a world leader in the arts and creative industries. Universal’s theme park and resort will be another tremendous asset to the sector. It will bring hundreds of jobs in the creative industries, showcase our wonderful British intellectual property, and enhance our soft power, as fans of British creativity across the globe look at the world-class offer in Bedford.

Alongside the creative industries this will boost tourism in the UK. In November of last year, I announced my ambition for the UK to attract 50 million visitors a year by 2050. The tourism industry is larger than our automotive and agricultural industries combined, and is projected to grow in the years ahead. This investment will create a new visitor economy in Bedfordshire, enabling Bedford and the region to showcase proudly all it has to offer to tourists, from the UK and globally. This Government believe everybody across the UK is a part of our national story, so I am proud that this investment puts Bedford at the centre of a new, major tourist attraction.

Government are working hard, together with Universal, to ensure that they can meet the ambitious delivery timelines. Even so, decisions on procurement and intellectual property rest entirely with Universal and as such they will be the first to share updates in those areas. Of course we have gone to great lengths to champion the strengths of British companies and intellectual property.

The Government are also working closely with Bedford borough council. It is essential that local voices and experience should be woven into any delivery of policy, projects and programmes; and given the scale of change and the transformational impact on the area, the imperative to do so is even greater. The council has shown commendable dedication so far to this project.

The Department would welcome the support of colleagues across both Houses for this transformational investment.

[HCWS590]

EDUCATION

Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby): I announced on 1 April that the adoption and special guardianship support fund will be continuing from April 2025, with a budget of £50 million.

I fully appreciate the importance of ASGSF funding to many children and young people and have heard many reports of how much it means to families. Therefore, I recognise that this funding remains significant as part of the wider support which local areas should provide to adoptive and kinship families.

However, we are in a challenging fiscal climate and are having to make tough but fair decisions across the public sector to address the £22 billion black hole that the Government inherited and to ensure this fund is financially sustainable.

Demand for support from the ASGSF continues to grow significantly. In 2025-26, in order to maximise the number of children who can access this fund, we have had to make the difficult decision to set the maximum amount of funding for an individual child each year, known as the fair access limit, at £3,000.

Specialist assessments up to the level of £2,500 will continue to be considered for funding, though only within the overall fair access limit of £3,000. Where it is assessed as being needed, local authorities and regional adoption agencies can fund therapy above the £3,000 fair access limit out of their mainstream children's services budget.

The adoption and special guardianship fund will still enable those eligible to access a significant package of therapeutic support, tailored to meet their individual needs.

I appreciate that these changes will require some applications which are currently in draft, or which have been submitted, to be reviewed. We have provided more detailed guidance to local authorities and regional adoption agencies about the practical implications of the changes, and the Department for Education's delivery partner, Mott MacDonald, is also able to answer questions.

Finally, we recognise the importance of ongoing clarity and stability in the provision of this important support to vulnerable children. We will be discussing further the best approach to the management of funds in future years. Future funding will of course be subject to spending review decisions. As a result, we will, for the time being, only be able to consider applications where the therapy or specialist assessment will be fully completed before the end of March 2026. We will make a further announcement in due course about the plans for the ASGSF from April 2026.

[HCWS589]

Oxford Business College: Franchised Provision

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): I am today announcing that I have taken action against Oxford Business College, a private provider of higher education courses franchised by five institutions registered with the Office for Students.

My Department became aware last year of credible concerns about the recruitment and attendance of students on courses offered by the college, for which students are eligible for student support. I therefore commissioned the Government Internal Audit Agency to investigate these concerns, and have now received and carefully considered its reports, which have been shared with the college and its partners for comment.

It is clear to me that the management of recruitment and attendance at the college has fallen well short of the standards I am entitled to expect; this is unfair on those students who have genuinely wished to study. In particular, the investigation has not been able to provide me with assurance that students' prior attainment, including their competence in the English language, has been adequately assessed, or that their attendance on their courses has been adequately monitored. I am aware that a number of the college's partners have already terminated their agreements with it or have imposed additional controls.

I have therefore informed the college that new students on its courses will not be eligible for student support with immediate effect. The college's partners have all told me that they have initiated planning for student protection, in conjunction with the Office for Students, which will allow genuine students to transfer to new courses. I recognise that this will be challenging, and have, therefore, allowed the college's partners until the end of the current academic year on 31 August to complete those transfers, during which time the students affected will be able to retain their maintenance and fee support, provided they remain engaged with their studies. If they transfer, they will be able to receive funding to complete their studies.

These decisions reflect my determination to stamp out any abuse of the student support system. I will not hesitate to do the same again if circumstances justify it.

Last month, the Government set out the further steps they are taking to address concerns about franchised provision. This included asking the Public Sector Fraud Authority to help co-ordinate the cross-Government response to address the serious allegations I referred to in my statement on 25 March.

The Government consultation on proposals to strengthen oversight of partnership delivery in higher education closed on 4 April. The responses to this consultation are being considered carefully to ensure that the Government response will be effective in preventing abuse of student support and poor quality in franchised provision. I will update parliament when the Government response is published.

[HCWS591]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Birmingham City Council

The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon): Industrial action continues to affect waste disposal services at Birmingham city council. The Government have repeatedly called for Unite to call off these strikes, and accept the fair deal on the table.

The major incident that the council declared, because of the risks to public health caused by interruptions to this vital statutory service, remains in force. The Government have taken decisive action to support the council in using the tools that it needs to ensure waste in the city can be safely and sustainably managed.

The statutory intervention in Birmingham city council is led by commissioners, who are supporting the council to undertake functions of local government in the city, including waste disposal services.

The Government have provided extensive and ongoing support to the city council to ensure the welfare of the citizens of the city. At the council's request, the Government have deployed operational and logistical expertise to assist the council in addressing the accumulated backlog of waste on the city's streets. That backlog presented real risks to public health, and especially that of the city's most vulnerable and deprived residents, who should not have to endure the presence of piles of waste on streets, in parks and in other public spaces.

As a result of this concerted and ongoing effort, and with the assistance of other councils, private operators, and the endeavours of many determined workers who have put in long hours, over 26,000 tonnes of waste have been removed, and rubbish levels are approaching normal. More than 100 bin lorries are out every day; regular bin collections have resumed, and the council

continues to monitor the situation closely to ensure waste does not build-up and to fight opportunistic fly-tipping.

I want to thank Birmingham city council for its continuing work to get the streets clean and to bring the dispute to an end. It must confront the challenge of modernising its waste disposal service so that it works for the people of the city and does not store up irresponsible liabilities for the future. While it is for the council to work through this with Unite, the Government support the council in its efforts to maintain the progress on resolving the equal pay injustice which saw thousands of women workers paid less than their male counterparts over many decades.

The council has put a constructive and reasonable offer on the table that protects the interests of the citizens of Birmingham, and of the council's own employees in the waste disposal services.

The deal on the table is a good deal. The council has worked hard to offer routes to maintain pay comparable roles, and in some cases to upskill and increase workers in scope. The ongoing and extensive clean-up and maintenance operation will continue until the industrial action is suspended.

The Government will continue to be on the side of those people, and to support the council in its journey to create the sustainable, fair and reliable waste service that residents in Birmingham deserve.

[HCWS592]

Petition

Tuesday 22 April 2025

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

Dualling the A66

The petition of residents of the constituency of Westmorland and Lonsdale,

Declares that giving the go-ahead to plans to dual the A66 from Penrith to Scotch Corner would bring huge benefits to the north west region, reducing congestion and providing a big boost to the north economy; further notes that it will limit the number of serious and fatal accidents which tragically are a regular occurrence on this road.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to give the green light to plans to dual the A66 between Penrith and Scotch Corner, which would reduce congestion, boost the economy, and save lives.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Tim Farron, *Official Report*, 25 March 2025; Vol. 764, c. 915.]

[P003054]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood):

I am determined that we will build the transport infrastructure to drive economic growth and opportunity in every part of the country, and to deliver value for money for taxpayers. The financial inheritance this Government have received is extremely challenging. We are currently undertaking phase 2 of spending review 2025, which will conclude in late spring. Future funding decisions are a matter for the spending review, and it is not possible to take a decision on the A66 project separately from this process.

Written Corrections

Tuesday 22 April 2025

Ministerial Corrections

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

West Papua Critical Minerals: Human Rights

The following extracts are from Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office questions on 1 April 2025.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): If he will amend the memorandum of understanding between Indonesia and the UK on a strategic partnership on critical minerals, published on 29 November 2024, to include conditions on the protection of human rights in West Papua.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West): The memorandum of understanding—as you are aware, Madam Deputy Speaker, having signed off on it in 2024—is an agreement to create a policy framework that promotes good environmental, social and governance practices in critical minerals, mining and processing. I was able to visit Indonesia in January specifically to raise concerns about human rights in Papua with the senior Minister for human rights.

[Official Report, 1 April 2025; Vol. 765, c. 144.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet (Catherine West):

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Catherine West): The memorandum of understanding, **which was signed off in 2024**, is an agreement to create a policy framework that promotes good environmental, social and governance practices in critical minerals, mining and processing. I was able to visit Indonesia in January specifically to raise concerns about human rights in Papua with the senior Minister for human rights.

Alex Sobel: In 2018, President Joko Widodo promised the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights that he would be allowed to visit West Papua. No visit has yet been facilitated by Indonesia, although two High Commissioners have been and gone. Without such a visit, it is impossible to assess the real human rights situation. Will the Minister ensure that the UK does not engage in critical minerals extraction in West Papua before such a visit takes place?

Catherine West: The UK continues to support the visit by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and, through initiatives such as the voluntary principles on security and human rights, and the UK-Indonesia critical minerals MOU—signed off by you, Madam Deputy Speaker—the Government promote best practice on sustainability and respect for human rights.

[Official Report, 1 April 2025; Vol. 765, c. 144.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs:

Catherine West: The UK continues to support the visit by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and, through initiatives such as the voluntary principles on security and human rights, and the UK-Indonesia critical minerals MOU—signed off by **the former Minister for Development, my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds)**—the Government promote best practice on sustainability and respect for human rights.

EDUCATION

Draft Cornwall Council (Adult Education Functions) Regulations 2025

The following extracts are from the debate on the draft Cornwall Council (Adult Education Functions) Regulations 2025 in the Third Delegated Legislation Committee on 1 April 2025.

Janet Daby: The Government inherited a very challenging fiscal context, and we have had to make a small reduction to the overall adult skills budget for next year. However, we will still be investing £1.4 billion in the adult skills fund next year. It is in the region of 3% across the academic year, which equates to around £40 million.

[Official Report, Third Delegated Legislation Committee, 1 April 2025; c. 7.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby):

Janet Daby: The Government inherited a very challenging fiscal context, and we have had to make a small reduction to the overall adult skills budget for next year. However, we will still be investing **more than** £1.4 billion in the adult skills fund next year. It is in the region of 3% across the academic year, which equates to around £40 million.

Janet Daby: The national statutory entitlement is to get the equivalent of GCSE level in maths and English, so that young people aged 19 to 23 have a second chance to get qualifications. Consultation has taken place in those three areas, and overwhelmingly, over 60% have confidence that the devolved money will be used for those local areas.

[Official Report, Third Delegated Legislation Committee, 1 April 2025; c. 7.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Lewisham East (Janet Daby):

Janet Daby: The national statutory entitlement is to get the equivalent of GCSE level in maths and English, so that young people **and adults** aged 19 to 23 have a second chance to get qualifications. Consultation has taken place in those three areas, and overwhelmingly, over 60% **agreed with the proposals**.

ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 22 April 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
JUSTICE	889	JUSTICE—continued	
Bail Guidelines	902	Prison Reform	903
Court Backlogs	899	Private Law Proceedings: Child Safety	900
Domestic Violence: Bail Conditions	897	Reoffending on Probation.....	898
Female Offenders.....	889	Reoffending: Young People	894
Hyper-prolific Offending	892	Sentencing Council	891
Intimate Image Abuse.....	901	Standard Determinate Sentences: Early Release....	900
Legal Aid	904	Topical Questions	905
Legal Aid: Rural Areas.....	896	Young Offenders: Staffordshire.....	894
Prison Capacity: Northern Ireland	898		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Tuesday 22 April 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	29WS	EDUCATION—continued	
Bedford Universal Theme Park and Resort	29WS	Oxford Business College: Franchised Provision.....	31WS
Living Heritage Inventory: Consultation Response	29WS		
EDUCATION	31WS	HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT	32WS
Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund	31WS	Birmingham City Council.....	32WS

PETITION

Tuesday 22 April 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>
OBSERVATIONS	17P
TRANSPORT	17P
Dualling the A66	17P

WRITTEN CORRECTIONS

Tuesday 22 April 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
MINISTERIAL CORRECTIONS	7WC	MINISTERIAL CORRECTIONS—continued	
Education	8WC	Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office	7WC
Draft Cornwall Council (Adult Education Functions) Regulations 2025	8WC	West Papua Critical Minerals: Human Rights.....	7WC

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons*,

**not later than
Tuesday 29 April 2025**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Tuesday 22 April 2025

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 889] [see index inside back page]
Secretary of State for Justice

Birmingham: Waste Collection [Col. 913]
Answer to urgent questions—(Jim McMahon)

Ukraine Update [Col. 924]
Statement—(John Healey)

“For Women Scotland” Supreme Court Ruling [Col. 945]
Statement—(Bridget Phillipson)

British Steel [Col. 970]
Statement—(Sarah Jones)

Littering from Vehicles (Offences) [Col. 989]
*Motion for leave to bring in a Bill—(Claire Hughes)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time*

Sentencing Guidelines (Pre-sentence Reports) Bill [Col. 992]
*Motion for Second Reading—(Shabana Mahmood)—agreed to
Read a Second time*

Petition [Col. 1020]

Coalfields Regeneration Trust [Col. 1022]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall [Col. 317WH]
Residential Estate Management Companies [Col. 317WH]
Statutory Sick Pay [Col. 346WH]
Retail Investment [Col. 354WH]
Automation: Economic Benefits [Col. 375WH]
Road Safety and Active Travel to School [Col. 382WH]
General debates

Written Statements [Col. 29WS]

Petition [Col. 17P]
Observations

Written Corrections [Col. 7WC]
Ministerial corrections
